Conflict in
A world without war.

JESSE GORDON

HEROES' DAY

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CREAM-COLORED COFFEE CUP

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For Joe and Cheryl,
there for me when I needed you most.

Prologue

They came for him on a Saturday afternoon. The shuttle was unmarked, breaking off from Pacific Skyway and descending upon Darren's oceanfront property with a discreet hiss. He'd been playing catch with the boys on the front lawn; the game was quickly forgotten as his driveway became a makeshift landing pad.

"Who are they, dad?" asked Connor, pointing as the shuttle settled itself.

A pair of uniformed men got out, started up the driveway, their boots clicking against the concrete.

The ghosts of your daddy's past, Darren thought, catching a glint of sunlight off the mens' badged collars.

He handed Connor the ball. "You and Jordan go inside and help your mom get dinner started, okay?"

Jordan started to whine. "But dad—"

"Go. I'll be in shortly."

The boys pouted only a moment longer before retreating toward the house. Darren watched them go, envying their carefree laughter, wanting to be beside them as they argued over who was to pick out the evening's TV show.

"Darren Hades?"

Darren faced his unexpected guests. "That's right."

The military men removed their hats. One of them handed Darren a notepad. "Lieutenant Gutierrez, NPAA personnel division. This is Lieutenant Teague. It's an honor to speak to you, sir."

"*Sir,*" Darren thought, not without a trace of amusement. *Sixteen years later and I'm still getting the Patriot treatment.* He woke the notepad, skimmed over the enclosed letter (a sugar-coated order, really), blinked in surprise when he saw the signature at the bottom.

He handed the notepad back to Gutierrez. "So, Zor's a commander nowadays? And aboard Olympus, no less."

"Yes, sir," said Gutierrez.

"You guys still looking for a couple of good soldiers, then? Bright faces, sound bodies, boundless spirits?"

"Of course, sir," said Teague.

Darren chuckled, glanced westward, his gaze following one of the planked pathways that led down to the shore. There, a couple walked hand in hand, a little girl reinforced the walls of her sand castle, seagulls coasted on the breeze. "You'd never guess there was still a war going on, would you?"

Neither Gutierrez nor Teague said anything. They weren't here for smalltalk.

They'd been given orders—*they're waiting for me to comply.*

Indeed, when he'd let more than the appropriate amount of time pass without speaking, Gutierrez cleared his throat and asked, "Will you accompany us voluntarily, sir?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Do any of us have a choice, sir?"

A moment's pause, another glance in the direction of the house, where Danielle, his wife, stood on the deck, her mixing bowl in hand, a questioning look on her face. She was a stickler about dinnertime, a firm believer that no order of business should ever interrupt a good meal shared in the presence of family.

Alas, today she would have to wait.

"Don't worry, Mr. Hades," Teague said assuredly as he gestured toward the shuttle. "We'll have you back in time for dessert."

* * *

The National Training Center was smaller than Darren remembered—and uncommonly empty. "Closed for renovation," if you believed the large sign posted out front (though there was a suspicious absence of building materials, scaffolding, or custodial mini bots, even). Gutierrez and Teague led the way into the main training room, with its impressive fleet of podiums and various gymnastics apparatus spread out over 75,000 square feet of taxpayer-funded floorspace. Above, the air-conditioning system hummed away dutifully, slightly muffling the distant sound of a door opening, closing.

Geoffrey Zor—once head of security, now, as his insignia denoted, a commander aboard Olympus—sat in a foldout chair that had been positioned at the center of one of the podiums. He'd been studying his laptop screen intently, but when he saw Darren his expression lightened, and he smiled.

"Darren, my boy!" Dismissing his men, he switched off his laptop and rose to his feet. He shook Darren's hand. "My goodness, look at you! I see you've kept up your training—still hard as a rock! Good to see you again."

"I can't say I'm not...intrigued," Darren said, and fingered one of the medals on Zor's uniform. "You've been busy."

"Oh, take a bullet, earn a promotion. That's usually how it works in the Patriot world."

"Some things never change."

"It's a work in progress. How are the wife and kids?"

"As well as can be with their husband and father having been suddenly spirited away by a pair of mysterious military men."

"Come now," said Zor, "I've only asked to borrow you for a few minutes."

Darren nodded, folded his arms—and found his old competitive modes suddenly reactivating themselves as his brain quickly assessed and analyzed, summed up in a single glance all of Zor's fundamentals: tall, moderately-built, bearded (most of it had faded from brown to gray), soft lines, relaxed waist,

noticeable worry behind the eyes. Sixteen years of Patriot work had affected Zor inversely. "All right, then. Let's get to it."

Zor's expression shifted from superficial to grave. "You've heard that we lost four of our top athletes?"

"Mental breakdowns," said Darren. "Political differences cited by the parents. It was in the news, yes."

"Then you've probably heard the rumors that the NPAA is retooling their approach for the upcoming season. The entire women's team has been scrapped. We're rebuilding the roster from the ground up."

"If I'd wanted a news report, I'd peruse the Internet—"

"There's more, Darren." Zor sighed. "The Patriot program has come under heavy fire."

"The Patriot program has *always* been under fire."

"Yes, well, it doesn't help that America—and the rest of the NAU, for the most part—has bypassed the gold and silver for three straight terms. The media has decided that we're battering our children for a lost cause, or that we're not training them hard enough, or that we're simply mismanaging taxpayer resources. 'We're paying for it!' they shout. 'We want results on Heroes' Day!' Yet, in light of recent events, it's apparently become popular to shun the years of practice it takes to get our athletes into top fighting condition."

"War without casualties," said Darren, nodding. "Not such a new idea. Isn't that the NPAA's secret credo?"

Zor chuckled. "That, and, 'Train hard or bend over for the EU.'"

Both men laughed.

"You know," Zor said, grasping Darren by the shoulders, "you were our first and last true Hero. Perfect attitude, perfect lines, perfect scores across the board. Media sweetheart. Poster child. You could have been a spokesperson for the sport, an actor, a dancer, a model. I never did understand why you retired prematurely. I'm sure your coaches were a hundred times as confounded."

"It was ten years of my life," Darren said. "Training, eating, sleeping, training, six days a week, year-round. I was tired."

"You were *good*—"

Darren snorted. "What's the score here? Tell me you didn't set up this little meeting just to rekindle old regrets."

Zor let him go. He turned away and strolled a few steps toward the edge of the podium before facing him again. "The NPAA is unhappy with the present-tense. Hence, we are to look outside our current predicament. A little of the past to hasten the arrival of the future. Effective immediately, I'm putting you in charge of the women's Patriot division."

Darren felt an unexpected twinge in his gut. Truthfully, he'd known as soon as the shuttle had landed in his driveway that something big was up, that his days as a competitive elite hadn't been entirely lost to the ages—he hadn't expected a coaching job, though. "Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"Never mind the fact that I've never coached a day in my life?"

Zor smiled. "You already know that the NPAA wants to do things differently. They want someone who knows discipline, someone who has experience with publicity, someone who once captured the hearts of every American man, woman, and child. They want the star power."

Sounds like the TV sitcom that won't die, thought Darren. "I'm a family man now. I did my time, served my country."

"And you will again," said Zor. "Don't forget the reactivation clause in your contract."

"And if I'm out of touch? If I've forgotten all the twists and turns?"

"You'll have an assistant—not that I suspect you'll need one. You were a warrior at eighteen, and from the look of that hulking physique of yours, you've never stopped training."

"Aesthetics," said Darren. "Good health. Force of habit. Nothing more."

Zor went over to his chair, picked up his laptop and tucked it under his arm. "Look around you. The National Training Center is a ghost town. This isn't just a minor glitch in the system. Americans are questioning their very belief in the system itself. I need you, Darren. America needs you."

"Oh, don't give me that." Darren shook his head. On the way into the training room, he'd been horrified by the barrenness; now he was beginning to think it was better this way. "Do we really need to go down this road again? Do we need to put yet another batch of boys and girls through the rigors because it's cute and noble and the popular thing to do?"

"Children and teenagers are resilient," said Zor, shrugging. "They learn to cope, and it makes them stronger individuals for it. You yourself are a perfect example."

Darren spread his arms. "I only did what I knew."

"And if you'd known different? Would you have gone back on your contract? Would you have resisted ever competing at a national event, perhaps refrained from ever setting foot inside a gym if you'd known there was more to it than just numbers on a scoreboard?"

I ask myself that every day, thought Darren. But what was done was done. He had his regrets, yes, his accolades, sure, but he'd managed to move on. Danielle had helped loads. She'd been a gymnast, too, and while she'd never become a Hero, she'd competed at enough of the bigger meets to know fantasy from reality. *Bowing out rather than burning out, regardless of what our coaches told us was right. I did what I had to do—and now the NPAA is after retribution.*

Zor started off the podium. "Your girls will adore you. They'll look up to you as their hero and their coach. If all else fails, you'll have their undying respect. My guess is that the NPAA wants some of that to bleed over into the public domain. Think of it as motivational speaking."

Darren started to protest, but trailed off when it became apparent Zor wasn't interested in continuing the conversation any further. He'd made his decision, and so had the NPAA.

"I'll have the paperwork sent over first thing in the morning," called Zor, now

heading toward the exit. “My men are waiting outside to take you home. Goodbye, Darren.”

He disappeared through the door.

Darren stood, still and quiet. The air conditioning system hiccuped. *From civilian to Patriot in under an hour.*

What did I do to deserve this?

Chapter 1

An hour before the recruiters were to arrive, Monica Sardinia limped into her coach's cluttered office and set herself in one of the plastic foldout chairs usually reserved for parents or guests.

"Problem," she said, wincing.

Gary Keene, founder, owner, and head coach of Keene's Gymnastics, set down his sandwich, sighed, and said, "It's been almost a week since you banged anything up. I was getting worried." He left his desk, knelt in front of Monica, taking her foot in his hands. "What are we looking at?"

Monica flexed her ankle and felt pinprick shards shooting up her calf. "I landed a dismount the wrong way."

"You're supposed to be on your lunch break," Gary said, an eruption of wrinkles creasing his forehead as he probed her ankle gently. "Was Donna supervising?"

"She was...there."

"Was she looking in your direction?"

"Most of the time."

Gary's eyes narrowed. "Her skill or yours?"

Monica bit her lip. She'd had this discussion before with Gary. No doubt he was wondering why on Earth she'd felt compelled to try something behind his or his wife's back on this afternoon, of all afternoons.

"It was mine," she admitted after a moment's hesitation. "I guess I had a little nervous energy."

There was weary disapproval in Gary's eyes. "You go the entire season with little more than a few mild scrapes and bruises, but you pick *today* to bring out the big guns. And on a Friday, no less."

"It's only a sprained ankle," Monica said. "Don't be so stressed." She patted Gary's bald spot.

"Me? Stressed? Hah!" Gary reached for the med kit. "All I do is work with a room full of bouncing, jumping, twirling, tumbling, chattering, utterly tireless girls six hours a day, six days a week. Who's stressed?"

Out came the nano gel, along with the control wrap. Gary spread the gel over Monica's ankle, applied the wrap. Then, using the remote, he infused into her flesh a miniature fleet of nanites, probing, knitting, healing.

Monica sucked in her breath. "Ooh, ooh! They're pinching me!"

"*Don't be so stressed,*" Gary cooed, imitating her earlier tone. "Their work will be done in a few minutes if you keep still and quit complaining."

Monica clenched her fists. The nanites didn't hurt, per se, but it certainly felt like millions of tiny insects had invaded her ankle—the bane of modern-day instant medicine, convenient as it was.

"So." Gary propped one arm across his knee. "You'll help with the car wash next week?"

Monica groaned. "Another car wash?"

"We were a huge success over the summer."

"What does a car wash have to do with our club, or with gymnastics—or with... with *anything*?"

"It gets the community involved. It helps pay the bills."

No, thought Monica, *it only gives creepy grown men and high school boys a chance to have their crappy Dodges scrubbed by little girls in T-shirts and gym shorts.* "I don't know. I start school on Monday. And my parents will probably have me unpacking all week. Maybe, if I have the time—but if I do help out, I'm wearing coveralls and boots."

Gary laughed. "Well, think about it. Think about us when you're out there in the real world, a high school senior going to raffles and dances and meeting boys who'll wonder how you spent ten good years of your life cooped up in Gary Keene's dusty old gym."

"I could never forget you guys!" Monica proclaimed. True, Keene's Gymnastics was a small club, with no more than a dozen gymnasts enrolled at any given point in the season, and true, you could easily miss the old converted general store with the silhouetted acrobat sign while passing on the street—but what the gym lacked in fancy, cutting edge imagery, it more than made up for in rustic charm. Monica had been training here since she was seven years old. It was her home away from home.

And today's my last day, she thought.

Gary, ever the uncannily-perceptive conversationalist, nodded and said, "Last day. I know. It seems like only yesterday you and your mother came in here for some tricks to take home. Now look at you, my finest junior elite, worth every headache, every gray hair on my head."

Monica smiled, appreciating the sentiment, but to her, the past ten years hadn't been "only yesterday," they'd been a lifetime—*her* lifetime. And she wanted it to go on forever. Through college, at the very least. Certainly she didn't want her career at KG to end because of money, politics, or, in her case, a hearty sampling of both.

"Buck up, kiddo," Gary said. "The recruiters are on their way. With any luck we'll be able to get you on some crutches. The girls can rig up a system of ropes and pulleys. You'll go out in a blaze of glory, knock everyone's socks right off! Send the military men back to their commanding officers with a tale or two about the spunky little girl from Sussex who did a beam dismount, crutches and all, without even breaking a sweat!"

Sarcasm. It was one of Gary's many tools, in the office and on the mat—regardless, Monica found herself pondering three seasons' worth of ignorance from the United States' governing athletic body: the National Patriot Athletic

Association. She'd been all-around champion at three consecutive National Conventions, and had placed in the top five at two dozen of the smaller conferences, national and regional—and yet she was ignored. Every year the military men came to KG, and every year Monica's friends were snatched up, taken to the National Training Center to train as Patriot athletes while she herself was relegated to staying behind. She would be turning eighteen next April, making her the oldest in the club—and the only junior elite (Gary had a small elite program, two to three juniors at a time, and the other two girls he was working with—Amy and Sarah, respectively—wouldn't be ready skill-wise until next season).

Nowadays, though she kept her skills polished and fresh, Monica was more of an older sister to the younger girls who were rotated in each season. She showed them the ropes, made sure they warmed up properly, stuck to their diets. In fact, while her training partners had celebratory badges sewn onto their leotards with labels like "Cadet" and "Junior Keene in Training," Monica's read "Big Sister," and was supposed to reflect genuine recognition of her mentoring contributions to the gym. But sometimes she almost felt embarrassed to walk around with her badge, her "rank," showing like an unwanted blemish, a reminder of how she was stuck in her own little niche.

Still, she wished she didn't have to leave.

Gary let go of her foot. Somewhere along the way he'd unwrapped her ankle, and was tucking the medical supplies back into their kit.

"All patched up," he said.

Monica got to her feet, tested her newly-repaired ankle. She was about to thank Gary for services rendered when Donna stuck her head inside the office and announced, "The recruiters are here."

Chapter 2

Badged and uniformed (and looking more than a little doggered by the late August heat), the recruiters—two of them—sat in a pair of foldout chairs that had been set at the periphery of the KG training room. Since there were no other qualifying elites at the club, it was just Monica, changed into her leotard, stretching, waiting as her guest judges spoke to one another in hushed tones, fussed with their tablets or laptops. Off to the side, the other KG girls sat, smiling, watching, silently cheering her on.

At long last, one of the recruiters lifted his hand and said, "You may begin, Ms. Sardinia."

Monica stood straight, presented, and took a deep breath. She started on the vault, then moved on to the uneven bars, followed by the balance beam. Her performance on each apparatus was utilitarian, her skill choices up-to-date with the current Code of Points, her combinations seamless. She focused specifically on her neatness, her toe point, and covered up any wobbles with clever adjustments. She finished with her floor routine, a solid set choreographed to a thundering techno beat and ending with an impressive tumbling pass, which she landed perfectly. Then, raising her arms and presenting once again to the recruiters, she jogged over to where the other girls were waiting.

"Stellar-high marks!" whispered Amy.

"Oh, you are *so* going to Olympus!" whispered Sarah.

The younger girls offered words of encouragement as well.

Monica thanked them, taking a swig from her water bottle and catching her breath. She paced slowly, eyes fixed on the recruiters. Gary and Donna were talking with them, no doubt quoting statistics, records, wheeling, dealing—doing what coaches did when it came time to promote their product. Nevertheless, despite the appraising looks, the nods of approval, Monica knew not to expect much.

As such, her heart missed a beat when Donna waved her over.

"Wonderful to meet you, Ms. Sardinia," greeted one of the recruiters as Monica stepped up to the group. "Your routines were quite impressive."

"Yes," added the second recruiter. "We were particularly impressed by your ability to incorporate fluid dance elements with your more difficult acrobatic skills. Very nicely done."

"Thank you," said Monica, smiling on the outside—frowning inside, for although the recruiters had readily dispensed with the compliments, she could see it in their eyes: *Having said that, we regret to inform you that we will be unable to offer you a contract for the upcoming competitive season.*

In quite the cookie-cutter fashion, the first recruiter said, "Having said that, we regret to inform you that we will be unable to offer you a contract for the upcoming competitive season." A pause, a sincere sigh that may or may not have been practiced beforehand. "Ms. Sardinia, the NPAA has had its eye on you for quite some time. Your scores are among the top in the country, and from what your coaches tell me, your work ethic is impeccable. But, unfortunately, your overall presentation isn't quite what we're looking for."

The second recruiter nodded. "Please understand, this in no way reflects on your technical abilities. It's merely our experience that the world-class stage requires a certain...presence, shall we say? We feel an athlete with your specialties would be best suited in the collegiate arena."

Monica kept her posture straight, her tummy tight, her chin up—she managed a polite smile, even. "I understand. Thank you for your time."

"No, thank *you*, Ms. Sardinia."

"Yes, Monica. It's been a pleasure."

Everyone shook hands. Then the recruiters donned their hats, tucked their laptops under their arms, and headed for the exit, fanning themselves as the Keenes showed them out.

Afforded a moment's privacy, the girls flocked to Monica, asking what the word was.

"The word," Monica sighed, "is no."

Amy's expression faltered.

Sarah snorted and folded her arms, aiming a glare in the direction of the club entrance. "Typical military suits. They probably don't know a cartwheel from a somersault."

But they do *know their sweetheart types from their ordinary, everyday athletes,* Monica thought.

Amy put her hand on Monica's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Monica."

Though she wanted to curl up somewhere and cry for a while, she forced it down, kept her composure as she shifted gears. "It's three hours till quitting time," she said, addressing the younger girls, "and Donna's going to want you warmed up when she gets back—so come on. Lunchtime is over."

On most days, it took a little prodding to get the girls motivated after their afternoon break and study period, but today everyone seemed to sense the need for compliance. Without the slightest protest, they all ducked into the changing room, swapped their casual clothes for their workout gear, then reemerged to take their places on the floor.

Monica had them start off with a series of stretches. She herself joined in, counting out loud until Gary and Donna returned and took over. Gary looked like he wanted to take her aside, ask her how she was holding up—but he knew her well enough by now, knew the best thing to do was pretend it was any other day at the gym.

Even though her last chance had come and gone.

Doesn't matter, she told herself as she slipped into the well-rehearsed motions,

flexing arms, legs, neck, and spine in succession. *The odds were never really in your favor—you saw how quick the scouts were to get out of here, to get on with their business. They'd made their decision long before setting foot in the gym.*

She let the memory of her display stew in the back of her mind, kept coming back to the recruiters' lame excuses for turning her down. They'd stated it quite succinctly: She was a very technical gymnast. Her lines were neat, her skills impeccably executed—but she was no sweetheart, no dainty little pixie trailing fairy dust wherever she walked. She was utilitarian, neck too thick, hips too narrow, overall musculature a little too prominent. Instead of a cute ponytail or braided hairstyle like that of the other girls, she'd opted to cut her hair short and have it flipped out in the back. While the other girls said they would gladly kill for her calves, give up an extra slice of pizza for a tummy as toned as hers, she, conversely, would have preferred softer lines, a bigger bust, a less boyish figure. She wasn't the spritely type at all, but rather a rugged, dependable athlete, and the military men knew this. They wanted to win hearts first, points second, and Monica simply wasn't a looker.

But, she reminded herself, supposed setbacks such as these were auxiliary annoyances. She could only imagine what it was like for normal girls who came home from public school every day and, with nothing better to do, stood in front of the mirror counting their various imperfections.

That's not me, she thought. *I'm better than that.*

Chapter 3

At just after five, when the parents started pulling into the KG parking lot to pick up their daughters, Gary, Donna, and the girls decided to spring Monica a surprise "graduation" party. In hindsight, she should have seen it coming; for the first time in her ten years at the club, the shower was free, the dressing room empty. But there was a lot on her mind—and so she missed all the signs until, back in sweatpants and T-shirt, her duffel bag slung over her shoulder, she emerged into the training room to find everyone gathered in the center. Donna bore a cheesecake.

"Surprise!" the girls shouted, whooping and clapping.

Reactivating her happy face, Monica swooned appropriately and, setting her bag down, exchanged hugs with her coaches and training partners. She allowed herself a sliver of cheesecake and half a can of soda. She sat on the balance beam, posed for pictures with the girls, with the Keenes. She pretended it was the most wonderful experience in the world to be leaving behind everything and everyone she knew and loved.

One by one, the parents wrangled up their daughters. When it was time for Amy to go, she jogged up to Monica and hugged her tightly.

"I'm going to miss my Big Sister," she said.

Monica returned the hug. "Hey, I'll still drop by from time to time, just to make sure you've done all your crunches."

Amy laughed. Then, summoned by her mother, who'd started to get impatient, she started toward the club entrance. "E-mail me!" she called over her shoulder.

"I will," said Monica.

There were more hugs, a few tears, even, as everyone cleared out. Monica stayed behind to help the Keenes tidy things up. (One of the reasons she'd been able to stay at the club so long was the fact that it was a small, family-oriented gym. Recognizing Monica's talent from the outset, Gary and Donna had offered the Sardinia family a considerable discount, and had even provided free transportation, with Monica's mother driving her to the gym in the mornings, the Keenes driving her home each night. The only stipulation—and it was more than fair—was that she serve as custodian in lieu of an expensive cleaning bot.)

Once the training room was dusted and brushed, the mats folded, the medicine balls and rubber bands put away, Gary announced that it was time to go.

Outside, the sun was fast retreating below the horizon. Monica stood by Gary's van, waiting for him to finish locking up. She watched the sky with heavy eyelids, studied the speck-tiny shuttle paths—Earth's skyways, leading to and from the

various high-altitude skyports—criss-crossing against the azure and amaranth canvas. Among the first points of light to brave the night was Olympus, the international space station, the jewel of the heavens—a promise that was, for Monica, to go unfulfilled.

Donna came to her side. "How are you managing?"

"Kind of bummed out," she replied.

"Don't be."

"*Don't be*?" Monica snorted. "My competitive career has just ended!"

Donna leaned against the van. "It's been hard for us all. No major U.S. victories for the last three Olympic terms, Canada and Mexico getting restless—the entire North American Union is hurting, and we're getting the blame. It's not a very prosperous time for the sport."

"That's a lousy attitude," Monica said.

"I'm not saying I like the way things are, nor do I agree with how the NPAA has handled its affairs as of late. I think it's been decades since they put their athletes before their image. But what can we do? You've seen the military men, this afternoon and all the other afternoons. You've seen how they come here and watch our elites, and when it's time to go, who do they pick for Olympus?" Donna sighed. "I love each and every one of my girls, mind you, but I can see as plain as the next person that it's looks before skills. Who has the right smile, the right curves, the right charm—who wiggles her butt the right way. Gary and I, we train *athletes*, Monica. Not pop stars. If our girls have been taken to Olympus, it's because their parents have decided they want their daughters to join America's current pop culture posse. It's their decision. Our influence ends once you step off these premises. While you're here I wouldn't dare spoil you by emphasizing flirtatious winks and scandalous gyrations over good, solid sportsmanship."

Of course, Donna was right. Monica hadn't the slightest desire to alter her look or step up her willingness to "put out" in order to snag herself a spot on the Patriot team. She'd always believed, perhaps naively, in a world where image was supplemental to hard work. Now the utter reality was sinking in, and she was certain that someone of her make could never excel beyond a few lower competitive circles. The worst part: failing to find a way around the Catch-22, failing to live up to her own expectations.

Failing to live up to her parents' expectations.

Gary approached the van. When he saw Monica's downcast expression, he tossed the car keys to Donna and wrapped his arm around Monica's shoulders. "Come, now. No soggy memories."

"I'm fine," Monica insisted, surprised to find a tear trickling down her cheek. "Really." She shrugged out of Gary's grasp, hauled open the van door, and climbed inside.

* * *

The ride into Sussex was a somber one. Monica stared out the window the

entire time, taking in the familiar side streets from an objective point of view—as if she were coming home from an extended stay elsewhere. As a young child, the small-town village feel of her neighborhood had always been comforting, but now it seemed claustrophobic. Many considered Sussex quaint and cozy, but Monica could see the cracks, the chipped paint, the rust. Her family was at the lower end of the middle class bracket, citizens of what the news folk frequently referred to as "a nation rapidly falling into disrepair."

The Keenes dropped her off in front of her parents' house. She waved goodbye and then let herself inside, softly opening and closing the door and stepping between the stacks of boxes as she made her way toward the staircase.

Her mother was in the den, grading papers.

"Dinner in half an hour," she said, catching Monica in passing.

"Okay."

"How was practice?"

Starting up the stairs, Monica called over her shoulder, "It was fine."

In her room, she closed the door and stood very still with her bag resting at her feet. She tried to feel like a champion would, tallying the accolades around her, the medals and certificates hanging on the walls, the photographs of her on the balance beam, the bars, the podium, in group pictures at various conferences. Her entire competitive career was encapsulated in this bedroom. She should have been proud. Instead there was a feeling of constriction, a renewed urge to jump or cry out loud offsetting the day's soreness. It might have helped if her mother had offered more than a mere, "How was practice?" Something to mark her awareness that this wasn't just the closing of an average day—something to show that she *understood*.

Instead there was quiet. Soft noises. The muffled sound of a news broadcast emanating from down the hall, silverware rattling downstairs, trees rustling gently outside.

I'm really home, she thought, glancing at the half-packed cardboard boxes, the piles of clothes. *And even home is mine no more.*

Chapter 4

At six-thirty sharp, the Sardinias assembled at the dinner table: Monica, downtrodden, still wearing sweats and her favorite T-shirt; Chris, her younger brother, rounded up from whatever corner of the house he'd made his fort for the night, his school clothes untucked and disheveled; Mr. and Mrs. Sardinia (Mike and Sharon, respectively), the former still in his pressed white shirt and tie and leading the table in prayer, the latter looking like she was still in the den correcting her students' worksheets.

Conversation was sparse, and came in the form of brief, sporadic bursts—mostly when someone wanted another chicken wing, a fresh roll, more peas or carrots (no one mentioned, or even insinuated, the impending move...even though the dining room was bare, all the portraits tucked away, the china cabinet empty). Mike asked how Sharon's day was, and Sharon responded with a pre-recorded comment about her affinity for Fridays. That out of the way, Mike offered a blow-by-blow account of his day at the store. Lastly, nodding at Monica and Chris and taking another mouthful of mashed potatoes:

"And you two?"

Chris immediately availed himself of the opportunity to relay a schoolyard tale involving himself and a wounded pigeon.

Monica waited patiently, finishing her meal and nibbling on a slice of sweet potato pie. She'd resisted talking about anything gym-related (or anything at all, for that matter), but now that everyone was shifting into dessert, now that only the tail-end of dinner would be ruined if she got into it with her parents...

"I'm going to miss the conferences," she said, once Chris had stopped talking. "KG, too."

Mike diverted his attention to his piece of pie, and Monica caught Sharon shooting him a betrayed glance before sighing, taking a sip from her glass.

"We've already covered this territory, Monica," she said, her face a portrait of quiet discomfort. "It takes money, and gymnastics isn't a money sport."

"I've made money," Monica said. Not Patriot money, but enough to help offset the costs of training and traveling.

Sharon set her glass down. "Monica. Let's not pick at scabs. You've had ten good years. It isn't as if you haven't had a good run."

"That's right," Mike piped in between mouthfuls. "First in the county, and never lower than fifth in the state—"

"And no contract," Monica said, almost accusingly. She wasn't outright mad at her parents—how could she be? They'd been generally supportive since the

beginning, money and motivation...although in recent months they'd become less and less involved in her gym-related affairs, not even showing up at meets if the Keenes could be counted on to provide transportation. Time was always an issue. Time and money. Years of holding out, waiting for Monica to explode onto the Patriot scene. Now that another season had come and gone without result, they were finally moving on to other, more important matters. Survival instinct—that's all it was. Trimming back, buckling down, selling the house in order to move a step or two ahead of their credit debt. Many of her neighbors had done much the same. No one was at *fault*. It was how things were. Yet Monica still felt the need to place blame for the state of Patriot athletics, circa 2099. She needed a reason why her scores seemed to mean nothing to the NPAA.

I may as well be a band without a record deal, she thought, *a painter who's never had an exhibition, a writer who's never seen his books on a single store shelf.*

Sharon said, "Gary and Donna promised you can stop by the gym anytime you want. No appointment necessary, of course."

Monica's face brightened (if only slightly). "Then...you'll drive me after school?"

"We'll see what we can work out," Sharon replied, smiling—

—though Monica knew it was mostly for show. Which wasn't to say her mother didn't want to be more supportive; she was merely caught up in her daily routine, her job, raising two kids. And Mike, he never got home before six on weekdays.

I'm being unrealistic, Monica thought. *Holding on to a lifestyle that was never mine to begin with—oh, don't start sulking.* It was on the tip of her tongue to politely decline any further connection with KG, to simply let it go, make it through her senior year at Hamilton, then community college. It looked like that was exactly what her parents were expecting, glasses, forks poised in mid air, mouths slightly open, waiting. *Time to accept your failures and move on. We've managed it. Why can't you do the same?*

"I'd like to keep in touch with the Keenes," Monica said. "I'm sure Gary can use the extra help around the gym. He's been so nice letting me train there all these years—I'd feel bad if I didn't do something to reciprocate."

Mike and Sharon looked at each other. No doubt they, as parents who hadn't been athletes themselves, were trying to figure out a way to break it to their daughter that they wanted to do things differently now that the poo had hit the fan.

After a moment's silent prodding from Sharon, Mike pushed back his plate and folded his hands on the tabletop. "Why don't we wait and see how it goes next week. We've got a big move ahead of us. You don't want to bite off more than you can chew. And you're in public school now. There'll be homework, a new schedule. I'm sure you'll want to spend more time with friends."

"In other words," said Monica, "you just want me to forget about gym."

"No one's saying that."

Monica stared fixedly at her plate. "Maybe if I'd saved my prize money instead

of letting Joe flit it away we wouldn't be having this conversation, and we wouldn't be moving into Aunt Deborah's *basement*."

Sharon reached across the table and tapped her hand warningly. "You don't mean that. Family looks out for family. Right?"

"Right," Monica said, immediately regretting having mentioned Joe's name.

Beside her, Chris covered his mouth with his hand, as if *he'd* been the one to talk out of turn.

"What would Reverend Coates say if he heard you talking like that?" asked Sharon.

"He probably wouldn't like it," replied Monica.

"I don't think he would." Sharon leaned back, folded her arms. "Your uncle Joseph came to us in a time of need. It was very noble of you to agree to part with your earnings. Joe helped us when we bought this house. But the tables have turned. Times are tough for everyone."

That was Mike's cue. He said, "Some of us have been hit harder than others. Remember how Joe was going to be the successful entrepreneur of the family? He spent ten years working part time and attending college. He was going to make something of himself. Now, with all his certificates and degrees, where is he? Where does he work? It's been one failed business after another. He's only recently begun to make a few inroads—and his debt is waiting for him like a storm cloud."

As is ours, Monica thought.

"We're of a certain make," Sharon said, "and it just so happens we're part of the working class. You have to realize it's not your skill set that matters, it's your connections. There are no other elites in our family. Never have been. We've been trying to start a blaze without the proper kindling—it's just not catching. We've known that for a while. We've held on for as long as reasonably possible, now it's time to cut our losses and move on, stop pretending that a Patriot contract will somehow appear out of thin air...lest we end up like dear Uncle Joe."

And there it was: the Sardinia Family State of the Union Address, delivered in impromptu fashion over sweet potato pie. *Sorry, honey, but you're just not enough of a moneymaker, so it's time to get our heads out of the clouds, time to hunker down and stop chasing after silly dreams.*

Monica's mood was hardly improved, though in all honesty she knew she couldn't hold it against her uncle for going broke. It had been almost a year ago, in November. Joe's third child had been only months out of the womb; the Sardinia family had had to scrounge for cash. Brothers called sisters, sisters conferred with husbands, and daughters with sizable caches of gymnastics prize money—college money—were requisitioned. Now Monica was out of her club, out of money, and her parents were trying to reassemble the pieces before she graduated high school.

It was frustrating, to say the least—and that, she realized, was a big part of what was going through her head. In the gym, she was away, mind and body. She didn't have to witness first-hand the lower middle-class entropy she'd been born into, didn't have to hear an exasperated sigh from her mother and connect it with her most recent KG enrollment fees. She didn't have to listen to her father's dire

murmurings about the crumbling economy and how precariously her family was perched on the financial totem pole.

She finished her dessert, helped with the dishes afterward. In the kitchen, while wiping down the cleaned plates as Sharon handed them to her, she told herself to be mature about things, to accept where she was at, to accept her mother as a grade school teacher, her father a store manager. After all, it wasn't their fault; they just didn't know any better.

Chapter 5

That night, while Monica was checking her e-mail, Sarah sent her an instant message:

gymsprite: OMG, Monica, you're online!

msardinia: Well, I've got loads of free time nowadays, don't you know?

gymsprite: Aww, it can't be that bad. I just got done with my math homework. My mom thinks she's going to win Teacher of the Year by cramming three chapters into a single night.

msardinia: Speaking of Teacher of the Year, my mom's been talking about taking on longer hours at her school. I'm going to be walking my little brother home on weekdays.

gymsprite: That sucks.

msardinia: He's not that bad...not really.

gymsprite: I meant about your mom's longer hours.

msardinia: Oh, well, she'll manage.

gymsprite: My parents are never around either. They make it out to the meets and all, but my grandma's the one who's around most. She says everyone's so stressed out because of all the crop burnings in Africa. Biofuel prices are through the roof —by the time I get my driver's license, it's going to be too expensive to go more than a couple of blocks!

msardinia: Things are tough.

gymsprite: Sure are. But hey, you're getting to go back to public school—there'll be boys!

msardinia: Don't remind me.

gymsprite: You say that now, but I bet you fifty ameros on Monday night you'll be calling me with news of some cutie who wants to take you to the mall.

msardinia: You think about boys entirely too much. No wonder you tumble like a drunkard.

gymsprite: Oh, don't be bummed out, Monica.

msardinia: I'm not bummed out.

gymsprite: You are too—spill it, babe.

msardinia: What do you want me to say? KG was such a big part of my life. I mean, I worked on my skills, my combinations, my form—I've always kept my national rank up where it matters, or where it's supposed to, anyway. And now here I am, about to get a good night's rest so that tomorrow I can help with the packing, so that on Monday my mom can take me to have my tag updated, my elite status removed.

gymsprite: Oh, Gloomy. At least you're not going common because of a debilitating injury.

msardinia: Ugh. Don't call me Gloomy.

gymsprite: Sorry. I didn't realize you were so down about the whole thing.

msardinia: I should have known after my third National Convention that it's looks before talent.

gymsprite: Says who?

msardinia: Donna. We spoke earlier today, at closing time.

gymsprite: Well, the Patriot girls do have that "I just spent three hours in the salon" look.

msardinia: It seems to be working for them.

gymsprite: Oh, pish. Patriots spend two-thirds of their time just looking pretty. You and me and Amy could probably punch-front them out the door at any NCPA meet.

msardinia: You're only saying that to make me feel better. You want to go to

Olympus as bad as I do.

gymsprite: Hey, babe, we all want that chance.

msardinia: I've run out of chances.

gymsprite: Those military jerks should be fired for not picking you.

msardinia: Not that I was expecting any special treatment, but...I wanted my time at KG to be more than just a hobby. I wanted it to do something for my family. I mean, if you make the national team, you aren't just an athlete anymore, you're a Patriot athlete, certificate, contract and all. You get free health care, free city transportation, housing for life. You get to represent the NAU overseas—you get to compete for your country during Heroes' Day.

gymsprite: Yeah, but do you want those things strictly for the money and the recognition, or for the sport?

msardinia: What do you want?

gymsprite: I asked you first.

msardinia: I want to compete for America—

gymsprite: Fudge-fudge! Hey, my parents are bugging me to get off the computer, but you just keep that frown upside down, okay?

msardinia: No promises. Goodnight, Sarah.

gymsprite: Goodnight.

Monica closed her laptop and set it on one of the boxes beside her bed. She'd already showered, dressed down for the night; all that remained was the physical manifestation of sleep—which, despite her exhaustion, didn't come easily. She curled up in her favorite plaid comforter and blinked at the walls, the ceiling, her eyes refusing to stay closed for more than a few seconds at a time.

She felt like it was the eve of a humongous competition.

After dinner, she'd dusted her certificates and polished her medals for the last time before carefully wrapping them in felt and packing them away. When she got her new room, she would replace the empty spots on the walls with posters of her favorite musicians and movie stars—she would keep her champion trinkets to herself, stored in a box at the back of her closet. If you'd never met her personally, you'd never know she was a junior national champion. It wasn't denial, she told

herself; it was...acceptance.

Close to midnight, she got out of bed, knelt on the floor, and said a prayer, asking for forgiveness and apologizing for slandering her uncle at dinnertime. Then she got back into bed, tossed, turned, tossed some more. Finally, she threw back the cover and left her room, went down into the den, with its quiet darkness, the familiar shag carpet beneath her bare feet, the feel of the beanbags and overstuffed sofa in the little TV nook. She curled up between the cushions and, reasonably assured that no one would hear her crying, let it all out, one sobbing fit at a time. The reasons behind her need for emotional release didn't matter. Maybe she was angry at her parents for spinning their wheels the last few years, maybe it was the NPAA's unwavering ignorance, or maybe she was merely unused to change, growing up—shifting from girl to woman in uncertain times. In any case, when it was over and she was all cried out, sleep came, swift and sure.

Chapter 6

Aunt Deborah's basement was pretty nice, as far as basements went. The boiler and furnace area were to the right of the stairs, the nicely-furnished guest room and billiards room down a hallway to the left—but it was still a basement, and the Sardinias were still a family of four without a home for the next few months. Monica was understandably introverted as Deborah (seemingly oblivious to any of the awkwardness associated with the situation) gave them the grand tour.

"Isn't it cozy?" she kept asking. "This was Kit's domain before he was shipped off to UNL. We'll have to share the bathroom upstairs, but there's power and heating, and network reception is quite good. You're welcome to stay for as long as you need."

Monica smiled and nodded politely, breaking off from Mike, Sharon, and Chris. She set her backpack down and ran her hand over the wood-paneled wall, discovered a discreet handle—closet space.

The billiards room was slightly smaller than the guest room. The pool table had been pushed over to one side; a cross-trainer, weights, and some mats were tucked toward the back. Monica examined the equipment, brushed her finger over the plates, which were dusty, but otherwise fit for use. She wondered if her parents would be keen on letting her arrange a miniature gym, something for old times' sake. She wasn't really into weight-lifting, nor was there any reason to keep herself conditioned—but it somehow seemed important to score a small sort of win in the midst of a larger defeat. A small bonus to offset an overwhelmingly lousy chain of events.

"Ah, I see she's found the training room," said Deborah, guiding the rest of the family inside. "Kit's idea. Bodybuilding was a major hobby for him during his teenage years. Evidently impressing girls was more important than finishing his homework." She winked.

Sharon glanced around, started to murmur something about dismantling the equipment and storing it in the garage—

—Monica cut her off, put on what she hoped was an irresistible smile. "Do you think I could use it? You know, to keep in shape and all? The weights and mats, at least?"

A sigh from Sharon. *We need the space,* her expression read.

Monica pushed nonetheless: "This can be my area. I'll put my bed here. You'll have the whole rest of the basement—er, *guest room*—to yourselves."

Sharon sighed again, looked like she was calculating an infinite string of numbers in her head. Monica knew it wasn't the time to be asking for favors, but

she also knew her mother would rather not stage a confrontation in front of Deborah. At least, not on moving day.

"I suppose so," Sharon said slowly. "That is, if your aunt doesn't mind."

"I think Kit would be perfectly okay if little Monica here used his weight machine," said Deborah, still smiling, still oblivious. "What's that old saying? You can take the gymnast out of gymnastics, but you can never take the gymnastics out of the gymnast?"

"Something like that," said Sharon. She hid her displeasure behind a forced smile.

"Well, if it's heavy lifting you're after," said Mike, hustling Chris toward the doorway, "there are plenty of boxes out in the car that need unloading."

"Yes," said Sharon. "Let's get started."

Chapter 7

Life outside the training room was an adjustment. That first Monday morning waking up in Deborah's basement, Monica sat yawning at the edge of her bed for a good few minutes. She did *not* want to get up, did *not* want to scavenge the boxes for clothes and school supplies, did *not* want to spend the rest of the day sitting at a cramped desk while some teacher droned on at the head of the classroom. But, like it or lump it, she was no longer an elite, and so was no longer exempt from her everyday duties as a common citizen.

She went into the guest room. The others were already awake, Chris stumbling into his pants, Sharon setting out bowls and spoons atop the card table, Mike fiddling with the TV's antenna as he tried to get a decent signal. Above, a confused garden bot continuously bumped against one of the windows.

"Good morning," murmured Sharon. "Amenities are in the box beside the door."

Monica nodded and tried not to pay too much attention to the clutter, nor to how *common* she felt, how derelict she must have looked as she rummaged for her robe, a change of clothes. When she found what she needed, she quietly slipped upstairs for her morning shower.

Deborah caught her *en route*, delivering a kiss-and-hug combo with impeccable timing. "Your first day back in public school—oh, aren't you excited?"

"A little," Monica replied, though really she wasn't the slightest bit eager to discuss or even acknowledge her newly-appointed mediocrity.

"Today's the first day of the rest of your life. You're going to make *so* many friends!"

I already have friends, thought Monica, ducking into the bathroom. *Training partners who are this very moment preparing for another day toward the new season. I should be with them, earning credits for my community—not making casual friends and distant acquaintances to fill my address book.*

Breakfast was quick and dirty. Monica spent most of the time getting the kinks out of her hair. Then it was off to school, Chris and herself walking placidly alongside all the other neighborhood kids whose parents were unable or unwilling to drive them to the Hamilton Quad Hub.

The campus was humongous, overcrowded—a miniature Tokyo bringing in students from Sussex, Lisbon, Lannon, and Butler. Monica managed to make it through her classes without bungling her schedule. At lunchtime, her friends made sure she was up on all the latest gossip. All in all, it wasn't that bad of a day...if you didn't count the after-school trip to the records office. Monica had gone there at

the start of her elite career to have her citizen's profile upgraded, her tag's elite flag activated. Then, the Sardinias had celebrated over dinner at a fancy restaurant; now, they simply went home.

And so went Monica's new routine. School and homework and puttering around Deborah's basement. Without gym practice, there was time, so much *time*. Time to do the dishes, time to spend at the laundromat, time spent minding Chris' affairs, running errands—explaining to neighbors why she was unwilling-and-or-unable to continue with her gymnastics.

"I thought you were away at camp," said some.

"I thought you were busy training for the new season," said others.

"Wow, do your coaches know you're not in the gym?"

"How can you find the time to train *and* take your little brother shopping for new shoes?"

To them all, Monica could only offer a sigh, a shrug, and, "I've moved on."

Sharon wasn't much help in the PR department. Though she probably wasn't doing it on purpose, her lack of tact in explaining why her daughter was out shopping for groceries instead of brushing up on her drills and skills was embarrassing, to say the least.

Tuesday evening, Monica and Chris accompanied her to the supermarket. As soon as they entered the produce section, Monica knew she was doomed, as no fewer than six of her mother's acquaintances were standing near the lettuce and chattering excitedly about money this, politics that. When they noticed the Sardinias were approaching, they waved and smiled, immediately assimilating Sharon into the group.

Monica waited off to the side with the cart, watched as the women proceeded to point at bad spots, gasp at price tags. Chris darted away, returning a moment later with a box of Chocolate Schnauzers cereal under his arm.

"What's that?" Monica asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Mom said we can each pick out a special item. A treat. What are you getting?"

"Nothing."

"But mom said you can pick anything you want!"

"I'm not getting a treat. You shouldn't either."

Chris frowned. "Why not?"

"Because we can't afford it."

"But mom said—"

"I know what she said. It doesn't change the facts."

"Why would she say it if it wasn't true?"

Monica sighed. "She's being polite. It looks good to the other mothers to say, 'Sure, honey, get whatever you want,' when really she's going to end up putting it on credit."

Chris gave her a sidelong glance. No doubt he hadn't a clue what credit was—nor pride, for that matter. He only knew that he wanted what had been promised to him. He put the Chocolate Schnauzers into the cart, then climbed inside, pushing the canned goods out of the way so he could sit cross-legged. He hummed

a cartoon theme to himself as Monica turned away, watched the neighborhood women watch her, halfway catching their conversations:

"...Monica's no longer an elite?"

"Oh, that's too bad. We could really use those community credits right now..."

"...it all comes down to those exemptions we all know and love. Have you readjusted your tax information?"

"How much of a hit are you going to take next year?"

"...shelf prices must look absolutely criminal without your elite discount..."

"...a shame. Such a shame. Couldn't come at a worse time. The neighborhood's lost three good elites this year. We had that Disch girl, you know, the tennis player whose family moved to Ohio. There was that Leung boy who had his hand shattered in a biking accident—they say his new hand has to be retrained from scratch. It will be years before he gives another public performance. Oh, and the chess player, what was his name? Mark? Matthew? Offered a job in California."

"Ugh. They all end up in California, don't they?"

"Land of the Elites."

"...and here we are, little ol' Waukesha County. Last on everyone's list. If ever there was a time for our remaining champions to band together..."

"...what can I do? She trained hard, she had the right skills, the right body type—by all counts she should be on the national team, but she's just not mastered the right mentality. I'm darned proud of her, but let's face facts: she'll never be a Patriot. Her career has plateaued at the junior level, I'm afraid..."

"...not that I'm in any way suggesting she's given it anything less than 110%, but, well, young women these days oftentimes don't realize their worth to the community..."

"...maybe the irony here is that all she needed was *112%*..."

"Oh, don't be like that. She'll hear you..."

Amazingly, no one made the slightest attempt at being discreet. Monica heard it all, the lost expectations, the disappointments, the prissy commentary regarding today's oblivious youth.

"I hate this," she muttered, and forcibly shifted her attention away from the produce section.

"Hate what?" asked Chris.

"Being a consumer."

"You're a consumer?"

"You, me, mom and dad, their friends—we're all mindless, driveling consumers digesting ourselves nine to five even when it's all over and there's no more money left and all we can do is stand around the vegetable aisle talking about how crummy things are."

Chris rolled his eyes. "Mom and her friends *always* talk like that."

True, thought Monica, recalling weekly Greet and Grumbles that went all the way back to when she was the one riding in the shopping cart—but it was different now. She waved her hand over a cup of cottage cheese; the price tag flickered a moment before settling on full retail.

From contributing elite to common dependent—one more hungry mouth to feed.

She pulled her hood over her head, stuffed her hands into the pockets of her sweatshirt, and told Chris to keep quiet until checkout time.

Chapter 8

August exhausted itself with dizzying speed, and September proceeded to whiz by just as fast. Monica's fears that her days back in the fold would drag themselves out indefinitely were gradually replaced with the daily bustle of school, family, and a burgeoning new social life (many neighborhood friends were eager to play catch-up, as well as make Sussex's former champion one of their own again).

And yet, try as she might, her previous life was not so easily disregarded, her acrobatic tendencies not so readily laid to rest. Though her mother never truly embraced the idea, she did allow Kit's workout equipment to remain in the billiards room. Thus, Monica was able to fulfill her inborn obligation to keep herself conditioned, as long as she promised not to do anything to herself that might warrant the purchase of excessive amounts of nano gel. "The stuff's expensive, so no using the bigger weights—and I don't want you doing anything Gary or Donna wouldn't want you doing behind their backs!" were Mike's exact words.

October arrived, and as the shadows grew longer, so did Monica's nostalgic tendencies come and go with less and less intensity. Every now and then, her brain chanced to produce an emotional hiccup or two (especially when her parents, in good faith, came around with that "Do you want to talk about it?" attitude regarding her various adjustments to normal teenage life), but she was always able to get a hold of herself before escalating to tears or tantrums. The world quietly rotated beneath her feet, never so crazy that she couldn't stand it.

On a Sunday afternoon Monica and her family gathered together in front of the TV to watch a live broadcast of the Patriot Cup. One of the more prestigious pre-season gymnastics conferences, the Patriot Cup was, as the title implied, Patriots-only, a progress report on Olympus' would-be Heroes—assurance that taxpayer muscle was being put to good use. Already the U.S. teams were beginning to take shape with a varied squad of four-dozen young men and women gathered from all over the country. These were the top picks, fresh from their first few months at the National Training Center. They lined up for the march-in, their postures perfect, their eyes bright, their smiles reaching ear to ear.

Sitting on the floor, her back against the sofa, her eyes fixed on the video screen, Monica felt the usual surge inside herself. Some of it was longing, but most of it was the mere excitement, the novelty, the hope and promise of an Olympic year waiting just around the corner.

Even if it's me on the outside, looking in, she thought.

The affiliate station handling the Waukesha County broadcast ran its obligatory

music and graphics introduction, followed by a brief "Raise the Bar" promotional showing a young gymnast in a time-lapse morph, first as a girl doing cartwheels and somersaults on her parents' bed, then as a junior elite winning her first gold medal at an NCPA meet, and, finally, as a Hero, standing alongside a fictitious Team USA as smiling dignitaries gave out wreaths, medals, and plaques.

Momentarily, a pair of commentators—a man and a woman—came into focus against a wide shot of the interior of the stadium. Monica recognized the pair as Tommy Shire and Megan Townsend, two former Patriots themselves who'd become regulars during the more recent broadcasts.

Dispensing with a brief greeting, Tom launched right into his signature, just-slightly-over-the-top spiel:

"Wow! You can hear it in the intensity of the fanfare thundering from the stands, you can see it in the looks of utter determination on the faces of the gymnasts and their coaches: we are going into an Olympic year! The world is watching each and every one of these athletes, these Patriots gathered from across the globe, living and training away from their respective homes for months at a time—putting in blood, sweat, and tears to make their Olympic dreams come true!"

"Right you are, Tom," said Megan. "And what a dream, to compete for your club—your *country*—as a Hero aboard the Olympus Space Station, the only station of its kind in orbit around Earth, built and maintained by the North American Union, but open to nations all over the world in the spirit of international competition and cooperation—"

Tom, cutting in (and growing noticeably more excited with each passing second): "It's the pinnacle of any Patriot's career—in the world of competitive athletics, you can't get any higher than Olympus. Literally! And today's competition is the first step toward making the cut."

"That is so true, and everyone here today knows it. You mentioned the competitive spirit; that spirit has never been more evident than it is going into the new season. We're seeing an incredible upsurge of international contenders that haven't produced qualifying athletes in two, sometimes three terms—the Portuguese, for example, the Czechs, Peru, South Africa. Diversity is certainly an apt buzzword as we approach Heroes' Day, 2100."

"Perseverance, too," said Tom, loosening his tie. "Everyone wants a piece of the pie, and it's no secret that the NAU has suffered heavy losses over the course of the last three Olympic terms. That's sixteen years since the United States, Canada, or Mexico produced a winning team—and not only in the sport of gymnastics."

Megan nodded. "We've long had to endure underdog status."

Tom removed his tie completely, set it on the table. "And with the national rank poised to slip downward another notch, with the economy having to support itself on a Patriot Grant that's sixteen years old—my goodness, can you believe it's been *sixteen years* since Darren Hades, with an impressive sweep of the 2084 Heroes' Day event finals, brought home the gold for the States? Factor in drought in the Midwest, terrorist attacks on our feedstocks, Congress seriously looking at making

some budget cuts in the aerospace industry, and it becomes obvious that what happens this Heroes' Day will be the dominating factor behind how we live the next decade of our lives."

Sharon snorted, picking shrewdly from a bowl of buttered popcorn. "They really know how to pour on the drama, don't they?"

"I'm all tuckered out—and they're not even on vault yet," said Mike.

(Chris was the smart one; he'd switched to reading a comic book as he waited for the gymnasts to begin their routines.)

Sharon continued: "They were talking politics on the news the other night. They say that if we don't get the national rank up this term, the government is going to have to cut funding for Olympus."

"They say that every term," Monica said.

"Yeah, but if this turns out to be our fourth consecutive Heroes' Day with nothing but bronze medals, if we lose our eligibility to even get our athletes aboard Olympus in the first place, it won't matter whether or not the station continues to operate—we'll be out of the loop."

"Goddamned government," Mike said, shaking his head. "No one wants to see an institution like Olympus go to waste, but things have become so bungled we can't afford to maintain it anymore. You know, they've been suggesting that we 'solve the problem' by selling the station to a competing nation interested in restoration. Handing over the prestige for pocket change."

"Oh, I don't know about *prestige*," said Sharon. "We've had Olympus for twenty years, and so far most of that has been budget problems and terrorist attacks. The world assumes that the U.S. has some sort of hidden leverage just because we sweep the floors and make the beds. I say, if the world wants Olympus, let them have it—they can fight over it until kingdom come. I have enough to worry about down here on Earth."

Monica's jaw dropped. "You mean just *give* Olympus away?"

"Well," said Mike, winking, "for the right price."

"You're joking, right?"

"Oh, honey." Sharon sighed. "We were never competitors, like you. I suppose it's only natural that we have a different perspective. You have to admit, though, keeping Olympus is like paying to maintain your own swimming pool and then letting neighbors use it while you stand off to the side, waiting your turn."

Monica looked away from her parents. There was heat building beneath her cheeks, a feeling of betrayal causing her pulse to quicken—*first it was KG that was deemed expendable, and now it's Olympus. What next? College? The car? Vitamins? Clothes?*

Luckily, the U.S. Patriots were beginning their exercises.

"Shh!" exclaimed Chris, putting his comic book down. "It's starting!"

The gymnasts had removed their warm-up suits. Their tempered physiques were skinned in the trademark Patriot colors: white, with a splash of red and blue across the shoulders. The camera offered a generous closeup of a fifteen-year-old Californian named Jackie Davisson as she prepared for her first vault. She was

nibbling on her lower lip.

"A star pupil at Sunburst Gymnastics," said Tom, off-screen, "Jackie made quite an impression at this year's International Convention of Patriot Athletes. She'll be doing a Yurchenko-type vault here..." Jackie started down the runway. She planted her hands firmly on the vault table, launched herself into the air. Her amplitude and execution were good, with knees and feet kept together while in flight, but her landing didn't quite stick. Nevertheless, Tom was ecstatic. "Wow! Incredible speed, great height, a little wobbly on the landing, but what a way to start things off!"

Megan, as Jackie padded back up the runway for her second vault: "Look at that smile. She knows she's gotten off to a good start. All she needs is to stick the landing in her next vault, and she'll have a nice average counting toward her final score. Of course, none of tonight's athletes will have to worry about their national ranking being affected until the 2100 season officially begins, but a preliminary meet like this gives the coaches an idea as to how their athletes will perform under pressure."

"And here we go," said Tom. "Vault number two."

Jackie's second run-through was as impressive as her first—though her feet didn't quite know where to plant themselves during the landing. She ended up sliding onto her butt, blinking in surprise for a moment before quickly jumping back up, presenting to the judges, and jogging off the podium. The camera followed her as she threw herself into her coach's arms, tears flowing freely.

Tom said, "Wow. You see these incredible feats of strength and agility on the vault, the beam, the bars—you sometimes forget that these athletes are only teenagers."

Monica stuck with the broadcast through the first rotation. On bars, beam, vault, and floor exercises, the drama didn't let up for a second, though it was faraway, confined entirely to the high-res grid of the Sardinias' video screen. There were other gymnasts as well, other triumphs and tribulations, but Jackie was clearly the American favorite, bleach-blonde pretty, emotionally fragile—ratings pay dirt.

"Does anybody want anything from the fridge?" Monica asked, getting up during a commercial break.

"Coke," said Chris.

Mike and Sharon shook their heads.

Monica's trip upstairs took only a moment. She fetched a glass of water for herself, a can of Coke for Chris, then returned to the basement—where everyone had shifted to the edge of their seat as they gaped at the TV. At first she thought that Jackie had perhaps lost a scrunchie, but then she saw the grave look on her mother's face, the grim set to her father's jaw.

"God, Monica," Sharon breathed. "Come look at this."

Monica reclaimed her spot on the floor, the drinks still clutched in her hands. The Patriot Cup had been preempted by a breaking news report—a hostage situation at an elementary school in Alabama. 300 teachers and students had been crammed into a gymnasium while a group of armed radicals engaged in a heated

stand-off against the police. Someone from inside had managed to keep a cell phone, and was feeding the news crew morbid images of women and children sitting huddled, frightened, some bleeding or bruised.

In the background, a man could be heard shouting:

"Give us our sovereignty! The Global Ranking System is a façade designed to take from the poor and give to the rich! Our farmers and workers are forced into slave labor by sneaky U.S. officials and Canadian yes-men who make deals behind closed doors to ensure our teams never advance in the ranks! We will be a slave nation no longer! Your diplomats say the GRS has abolished war—the war has only begun!"

Monica felt herself squirm (as she often did whenever a band of domestic terrorists made the news). The people on the screen looked to be of varying ethnicities. They had American accents—they might have, at one time, been businessmen, politicians, community pillars. Now they carried guns, dealing in desperation, mourning the death of the middle class by making an example of themselves.

"God almighty," muttered Sharon.

"Christ," said Mike.

(Amazingly, the two of them were still eating popcorn.)

After a while, the Patriot Cup came back on.

No one felt like watching.

Chapter 9

Extremist demonstrations in Patriot America were nothing new. The formation of the NAU was as controversial a move as the conversion to a paperless monetary system a decade prior—strikes, picket lines, marches, rallies, and, sometimes, violent displays of civil unrest were common symptoms of a nation trying to consolidate its vision of prosperity.

For many Americans, these were cursory worries, facts of life to be added to the backs of minds already preoccupied with an ailing job market, skyrocketing fuel prices, store shelves carrying bloated markups and limited variety. However, the repercussions from Sunday's hostage crisis reached deep, and were manifested startlingly quick. First thing Monday morning the Hamilton administration announced over the P.A. system that it was time to initiate a long-overdue security plan, starting with mandatory real-time tracking for all students. Several days and one signed parental consent form later, Monica found herself standing in line (along with several hundred other students) on the soccer field as a delegation of police officers updated everyone's tag information.

"The terrorists have already won," said Pat Sandsby—blond, bespectacled, perennially clad in anti-establishment T-shirt and camouflage shorts—as he offered himself cuts in front of Monica. (She only allowed him the privilege because the line was in alphabetical order, and because Pat often loaned her lunch money.)

"How's that?" asked Monica.

"Something like this new security plan," Pat said, "it's not to protect us, it's to keep tabs on those labeled as 'misfits,' those who might be inclined to check out the wrong combination of books from the library, those who might show an interest in converting to a non-Christian faith and running amok with a pipe bomb. Whether or not they stop something like that before it happens isn't as important as the principal being able to tell authorities, 'It's not our fault—we had a security plan in place!'"

"*Something* had to be done," Monica said. "Can you imagine all the phone calls the school got after everyone's parents saw the news broadcast? And anyway, we're minors—our *parents* signed the forms."

Pat scrunched up his nose. "My old man wasn't going to sign anything, but my mom was concerned. They went at it all through dinner. The short version is that I'm to be tagged and tallied—but that doesn't mean I'll be in the matrix, per se."

Monica rolled her eyes. She knew Pat had a way with computers that belied his skater-punk exterior. "Are you going to hack your tag? Turn it off?"

"No, no, that would only cause problems whenever I pass a scanner or when

the teachers take roll and I don't show up on their readers even though I'm standing right in front of them. No, I have this program that lets you swap tag information with other people who are close by. It works best in crowds. I'll be on campus, but I won't be who their computers say I am—and if it doesn't work this week, it will next, 'cuz they're always hacking the firmwares." Pat winked. "I can e-mail you a copy, if you want."

"Maybe on a rainy day," Monica said, laughing, stepping forward with the line.

Pat wagged his finger at her. "Hey, that day may come sooner than you think. Look at it this way: Let's say tomorrow a gang of militants decides to lock down the campus—they'd have to keep us all in check visually, and that's pretty hard. Someone could sneak away, get to a phone, call the cops. But if everyone's got their tag broadcasting in real-time, instead of having to manage several hundred people individually, all the gun-heads have to do is deal with that one single administrator who has the reader, and suddenly they know where each and every one of us is located." He scowled. "We're giving them real-time rosters to play with—we're making it easier for them to shepherd the herd."

Monica considered. "Well, if our enemies don't bring their infrared equipment with them, that is."

"Doesn't matter," Pat said. "The point is that this is an extraneous amount of effort with very little payoff, if any at all."

"But it's politically correct."

"And how."

Afterward, once Pat and herself got their tags updated, they sat together on the grass and had lunch. Angeline, also a senior, joined them.

"I don't know if I like this," Angeline said, brushing her arm as if her tag was an actual device that had been implanted subcutaneously.

"What?" asked Pat.

Angeline glanced over her shoulder. "I feel like I'm being watched."

"You *are* being watched."

"I know. I don't like the feeling."

"You're just a blip on the administrators' screen," said Monica. "They can't actually see you."

"Still, they'll know when I'm at the snack machine or when I'm in the bathroom..."

Pat grunted. "Yeah, they probably have nano cams installed in the urinal cakes so they can get some nice candid shots of me taking a leak. In the name of domestic security, you see."

Monica put her hand on Pat's shoulder. "Trust me, Pat, no one wants to see you taking a leak—on or off camera."

Angeline laughed.

Pat blushed, and was quick to ensure the conversation was directed elsewhere. "Hey, Angie, did you see the Alabama Massacre on Sunday?"

"Oh, it was terrible!" replied Angeline, brushing her arm once more and then settling into a more relaxed posture. "I feel so sorry for those people."

"A hundred dead by the explosion, a dozen more from dehydration, fifty injured. Freakin' terrorists." Pat wrung his hands and looked like he wanted to hit someone.

Monica tried to think of something meaningful to say, but it was difficult. Here, perched at the southeast edge of Wisconsin, where it was safe, familiar, the events on the news seemed like bad dreams. Nothing ever happened in Waukesha County. Not directly. But there were repercussions. A slow decay, little things lost here or there over time. The States performed poorly for three Olympic terms, and Monica's parents could no longer afford to keep her training with the Keenes; a biofuel crop in Africa went up in flames, and prices at the corner pump jumped half an amero; a school in Alabama was devastated by political guerrillas, and Hamilton's students were required to submit to round-the-clock surveillance. Regardless of the how's, why's, and where's, there was little a teenage girl—without a Patriot contract—could do except shake her head and wring her hands.

"My dad used to tell me stories," Pat said once he'd calmed down, "about when he was a teenager, back before the Patriot System was introduced. They still fought wars out on the battlefield—the news was always showing the aftermath, the fields littered with corpses. My dad said people were getting tired of it. They didn't want to see it anymore."

Angeline nodded. "Now it's all done in courtrooms, in think tanks, and on Heroes' Day."

"Strategical economics," Monica said, holding up her hand and turning on a more teacherly tone of voice. "The disbursement of resources according to global rank. Military is only used to enforce compliance with the Patriot System, if necessary."

"Yeah," said Pat, "but we're still at war with each other. It's just that nowadays we hide behind rules and regulations. We're no better off than we were twenty years ago. The Massacre is proof of that."

"It's proof that terrorists will always try to ruin it for everyone else—"

"It's proof that nothing changes, and that progress is in the eyes of the political candidate running for office. Why do you think it's mandatory to enlist when you turn eighteen? How else do you think the losing countries are made to turn over their quotas to the winners every four years?" Pat smiled grimly. "We're still at war, girls, don't you forget it. And now we're getting real-time Big Brother monitoring—and you, Monica, you're a gymnast. Did you hear how those four Patriot girls ditched the national team after what happened on Sunday?"

Monica shook her head. "I kind of tuned out once the news report hit the feeds."

"Yep," said Pat. "It was too much for them. Something about their coaches insinuating their inadequate scores were part of what sent the militants over the edge. They reneged on their contracts. The rest of the team isn't faring too well, either. We haven't a clue who's going to make it to Heroes' Day. Well, I'm sure that Davisson girl will—but she's the prima donna type, probably isn't biting the bullet for her country so much as she's holding out for the endorsement checks, the

modeling contracts and record deals."

"Yes, yes," said Angeline, rolling her eyes. "We all know the world is coming to an end, and your family will be the only ones prepared because you and your father built that bunker beneath your house."

Monica chuckled, apt to dwell on the unexpected downturn of Patriot morale, but instead finding solace in her friends' self-deprecating routine. Poking fun at the Sandsby family's End of Days practices was always comforting. Sarah, no doubt, would have suggested making out with Pat instead of merely making fun (he *was* reasonably cute, in a rough-and-tumble kind of way), but Monica was perfectly content to have him as her on-campus buddy. Her big brother. As odd as the notion may have been, he represented all the little concerns tossing around inside her head, and if she could playfully disregard him, so could she disregard the things that bothered her most. She hadn't the means to do anything else.

"Haw-*haw*," said Pat. "We'll see who's hiding in whose basement once push comes to shove. But let's move on to more important matters." He looked at Monica. "You owe me for yesterday's sandwich. Chicken, lettuce, and tomato, I believe."

Monica blanched, knowing it was true. She'd promised a favor in exchange for the lunch money her parents had decided she could do without. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go out with me?" Pat asked, smiling.

In answer, Monica exchanged an amused glance with Angeline and said, "Try again, geek boy."

"Okay, so you're not ready to admit you want my manhood—I'm patient. I can wait." Pat looked thoughtful for a moment, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he surveyed the field. "Well, seeing as how we've just eaten, let's have a little sparring contest. Backflip off that wall over there. You outperform me and I drop all charges. Angie can be the judge."

"You're on," said Monica, standing, stretching.

Pat stood as well. While he wasn't necessarily an athlete, he *was* athletic, and practiced urban parkour (which Monica oftentimes referred to as "a degenerate form of gymnastics"). He waited until there weren't any students in the way, then ran at the wall, planting his foot firmly against the brickwork, leaning back, and springing off again with impressive height on his rotation. He landed on his feet, pivoting and flashing a smile at Monica as he took a bow. A nearby onlooker whooped and clapped.

"Well?" he asked, nodding at Angeline. "What does the judging panel think?"

Angeline frowned, pursed her lips. "Hmm. Good energy, but sloppy form, and your boxers were showing—and you hopped a little there at the end."

Flicking her off, Pat said to Monica, "Your turn."

Monica gave herself a good running start, then scaled the wall. She was glad she'd worn sneakers today; as she pushed off, she added a twist to her rotation in mid-air, so that when she landed, she was facing Pat and Angeline—and Ms. Baskett, one of the north campus teachers currently serving as monitor.

"Young lady," said Baskett (unlike Monica's peers, she wasn't smiling), "this isn't a jumping room. Come with me."

Pat covered his mouth and pointed at Monica. "Busted!"

The gathered students offered a round of applause.

Chapter 10

Monica's wall-flip stunt earned her an afternoon of detention, as well as scheduled visits to the counseling office, where it was decided her "acting out" was the result of suppressed emotion regarding her retirement from club gymnastics. Though she made every effort to convince the counselor otherwise, it seemed her parents had no qualms over jumping at the chance to explain their daughter's "asymmetrical" behavior. She hadn't cried in front of them since leaving KG, and so they assumed she hadn't cried at all, hadn't released the pressure.

"Poor Monica," they said, shaking their heads and clicking their tongues whenever they thought she was out of earshot. "She's kept everything inside, and now it's reached a fever pitch. All those years foregoing a normal childhood while trying to become the champion who wasn't to be, and now she hasn't a clue how to re-assimilate. She spends all her free time down in her corner of the basement. She still trains like a gymnast. I don't think she even realizes there's something wrong..."

(The only thing wrong, as Monica saw it, was that she was doing backflips for chicken sandwiches instead of for Patriot contracts.)

"You could lay on that shrink's couch for years," said Pat, catching her one afternoon after a counseling session, "and she'd never grow wise to the fact that you're A-OK. It's just not possible for doctor types."

Monica scowled, slung her backpack over her shoulder. "She doesn't even have a couch. We spend the whole hour sitting together at a table and writing out what I'm supposed to be feeling on a piece of paper. She must buy office supplies by the crate."

"She doesn't sound very intuitive," said Pat.

"I don't think it's ignorance so much as it's a desire for a paycheck that keeps her wanting to find something seriously wrong with me." *And my parents are actually paying for our time together. We're living in a basement because of rising expenses, and yet somehow there's room for me to see a shrink!* "'Do you think it's your fault your parents lost the house?' she asks. I tell her, 'No, of course not. That's silly.' And she's like, 'You were an elite. Many elites feel pressure to live up to their parents' standards, as well as those of their community—even after they've gone common.' So I say, 'Well, there's certainly pressure from educational institutions to conform to current standards regarding emotionally-fragile teenage girls,' and she just smiles smugly and says, 'Hmm. That's all for today.' Like she's had a revelation or something."

Pat laughed. "Paid professionals: the blind leading the blind. Walk you home?"

"Sure."

They left the north campus, swinging by the elementary building to pick up Chris, then passing through one of Hamilton's shiny new checkpoints (where bored, underpaid-looking security guards mumbled for them to stand still as they waved their wands and checked their clipboards) and heading northwest along Silver Spring. It was a considerable walk, but Monica had the legs for it, and Chris, his limbs *never* tired. Not unless the planets were in a certain specific alignment (and even then it was tricky).

Pat was on and off his skateboard, and didn't talk much. When he did, it was in a quietly accommodating kind of way—totally uncharacteristic for him. No government-this, no politicians-that.

"You're awfully quiet," Monica observed after a while.

Pat raised his eyebrows. "Am I?"

"You are."

"Guess I've got some things on my mind."

"Like what?"

Pat took a deep breath, a sudden reddening evident in his cheeks. "Like us."

It took a moment for Monica to respond—namely because Chris was still walking beside them and looking like he was interested in what Pat had meant by "us."

Indeed, he stepped beside Monica, tugging on her sleeve and whispering, "I think he wants to do big-kid stuff with you!"

Monica grimaced. "What's 'big-kid stuff?'"

"Smooches!" Chris puckered his lips—and jumped out of the way as soon as Monica swatted at him.

Beside her, Pat looked like he was about to have a coronary.

Oh, my God, thought Monica, straightening, realizing Chris's observation wasn't far from the truth. *Big-kid stuff.*

She waited until they reached Heath Street—at which point Chris took off up the walk, toward home—before she confronted Pat with, "*Us*?"

"Forget I said it—"

"Tell me."

Pat slowed his gait. He dug his fingernail into the deck of his skateboard. "Well, I mean, with you out of gym and all...you have more free time, right?"

"I have...time."

"Well, I thought maybe you and me...I was thinking we could do more things together. You know? Like...together."

Monica stopped, faced Pat. There was something catching at the back of her throat; she could see it was the same for him. He was looking back at her, smiling, an intense passion behind his eyes. She knew he'd been harboring a crush for at least the last handful of years, and that he'd been waiting patiently for the defining moment in which to spring The Question—and now that it had been sprung, she found herself less-than-prepared. It was scary, the thought of having a boyfriend, of being a girlfriend. She knew Pat would treat her right, knew that he would be a

devoted crush, a memorable first time, a faithful partner...perhaps even a husband, if they stuck it out—*but is this what I want? Is this how it's to turn out? A steady, certain progression from best buddy to bed buddy to my baby's daddy? Street corner acrobat and conspiracy theorist sticking it out here in little ol' Sussex till death do we part?*

Pat was waiting. Monica reached out and squeezed his hand, leaned over and kissed him quickly on the lips. Just to see. Without a word, he leaned forward so that their foreheads were touching. She could smell mint chewing gum on his breath, wind and sun in his hair, some sporty deodorant on his skin as wordlessly he asked her for another kiss, tilted his head—

—she pulled away. "Pat."

"Sorry, Monica—"

"No, it's not you. It's...it's just..." She fell silent. *It's just that if I accept you, then I accept my life as a commonplace citizen. I don't know if I'm ready to do that—oh lord, listen to me. As if I'm freaking royalty. As if there's the slightest chance I'll ever have to blow off a date because of gym practice.* "I need to think a few things over. I hope you understand."

Pat cleared his throat, nodded, smiled. "Hey, no questions asked."

Monica smiled, too, and started walking again. When they reached Deborah's house she thanked Pat for walking her home. She stood in the yard and watched as he rode his skateboard down the street, out of sight.

She wondered how long it would take for her heart to stop hammering in her chest.

Chapter 11

Dear Diary,

This is supposed to be my first entry, but somehow it doesn't feel like anything more than a rough draft of a rough draft. I've never been a writer. My counselor thinks it's good for me to keep a journal. She's convinced my parents that it's an outlet, and everyone knows a misfit such as myself needs an outlet. For what, I don't know. Everyone seems to think I'm holding something back because I've kept up with my training, or because I'm not cutifying myself like girls my age should. They think I'm unladylike. My mom keeps bringing around these flowery skirts and blouses—she thinks part of my problem is the pants and sweatshirts I'm always wearing. "You're not running to and from practice anymore," she always tells me. "You can dress nicely now." Ugh.

It's Halloween today. October has really flown by, considering the circumstances. Pat has made his intentions clear. I guess I've known all along that he's had a crush on me, but now it's really obvious. I feel so sorry for him. I get the feeling he's never hit on any other girl because he's been holding out for the day I say "yes." In a way I'm flattered. Most boys are crude, making fun of my size or cracking the usual dirty jokes involving a gymnast's flexibility in bed. Pat's crude, too, but in another way. He's never said anything derogatory toward me. He actually treats me very well. And yet it's hard to think of him as more than a brother. I'm curious, I suppose, about going steady with a guy, but...I don't know. I don't know about anything right now. I can't believe I wrote all this. It's Halloween and I'm sitting here writing. This is stupid. This isn't even a real diary, it's a free app my dad found online. Paper's too expensive. So much for posterity.

Monica shut off her laptop, set it beside her bed. She still had homework to finish, but it was hard to find the inspiration, and so she remained sitting with her back against the wall, her legs drawn up against her chest—as if she were huddling for warmth despite the billiards room's liberal thermostat setting. It was like that last night in the old house, the old room, feeling like it was the eve of something incredible, except now it was teenage worries, the intricacies of friendship...how to deal with a boy whose crush threatened to seal her fate.

A knock at the doorway, the familiar smell of Sharon's perfume. "Monica?"

"Yeah," replied Monica.

Sharon stepped into the room. "Your father's going to be late tonight. I took the liberty of picking up dinner. Chinese food. It's on the table."

"I'm not hungry."

"You'd better not wait until Chris has had his way with the fried rice—"

"I'm finishing my homework." Monica picked up her laptop, switching it on again.

Sharon sighed, turned and left; her voice wafted in from the other room. "Well, if you feel like coming out of your cave in a little while, I'd appreciate your taking Chris out for trick-or-treat—"

"*Mom*."

"—you know how he's had his heart set on chocolate since August. Twenty minutes should do it, up and down the street—it'll spare everyone's nerves not to have him whining about missed opportunity afterward. I'd go, but I have a stack of papers to grade, and laundry to do, and a million other things..."

Ugh, she's rambling. "Fine. I'll be out in a bit."

Paper bags rustling; Chris saying something about a missing fork as he tore into his meal; the TV being turned on—normally the background noise didn't bother Monica, but now it was excruciating, a probably-isn't-but-surely-might-be subtle hint that as the Big Sister of the family she was expected to graciously yield to the confectionery needs of her kid brother. After a few minutes' spoiled concentration, she set down her laptop and went out into the main room, filched an egg roll from the tray. "All right, let's get this over with so that I can finish my homework and possibly pass the twelfth grade."

"Monica," said Sharon, "a little enthusiasm, please."

"I said I'd take him."

"Well, you don't have to act like it's the biggest chore in the world."

"I'm not acting."

Sharon disregarded her, instead nodding at Chris. "Are you ready to become a tiger?"

"You bet!" Chris shouted.

"Wipe your mouth, sweetie."

Up in the bathroom, the transition from boy to animal was initiated, Sharon doing makeup, Monica doing wardrobe, and Chris rehearsing his growls.

"You're not dressing up this year?" he asked as Sharon applied whiskers to his cheek.

Monica, working with needle and thread to attach Chris' tail to his backside, said, "Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because trick-or-treating is for little kids."

Chris pondered this, allowing Sharon to continue applying makeup a moment longer before raising his hands and pushing her away. "Then I won't wear a costume either."

"Chris—" began Sharon, wrestling with him.

"I'm not a little kid!"

"Christopher Michael Sardinia!"

Monica dodged out of the way as Chris really started squirming. "Watch it! You're going to get a needle in your ass!"

The battle between mother and son reached a crescendo. When it became evident her efforts would do nothing more than make an even bigger mess of things, Sharon backed off, dropped her sponge onto the counter top, and glared at Monica. "Happy?"

"Don't blame *me*," said Monica, rising to her feet, severed tail in hand. "He's the one who won't stand still."

Sharon folded her arms. "You're his older sister, and, apparently, his latest idol since taking up chronic apathy."

You say that like I'm a rebel or something, Monica thought. *Like you* want *me to rebel.* "Can we call a peace treaty?"

Sharon spread her hands, waited.

Squatting before Chris, Monica asked, "You're not going to dress up?"

Chris shook his head.

"Then how will you get your candy?"

He looked thoughtful. "How are you going to get *your* candy?"

Monica straightened, folding her arms and tapping her sneakered foot against the floor. "You know I don't eat candy."

"But you're not a gymnast anymore. You can eat whatever you want."

"I'm still a gymnast. I just don't have anywhere to practice." Monica set the tiger's tail on the counter top. "I'll be out front. Let me know if and when you're ready." She left the bathroom.

That'll earn me another session with the counselor, she thought, descending the staircase and breezing out the front door. She waited in the yard, patient, impatient, wishing for something, for nothing.

It was a good ten minutes before Chris, his costume fully assembled, presented himself to her on the front step. His tiger's tail hung limply on the doormat.

"Mom says for me to apologize," he said.

Monica wiped away a few lingering tears. "That's okay."

"Will you still take me trick-or-treating?"

"Sure."

Chris beamed, growled accordingly.

Sharon caught them as they left the yard. "See you in a bit!" she called, waving, putting on a smile as if everything were hunky-dory.

Monica started down the street, Chris bounding along ahead, his sweet tooth leading him on. There were other kids as well, ghouls, ghosts, goblins, superheroes, and devils—all wandering the neighborhood with a taste for sugary morsels. The bounty wasn't all that impressive, though. A good majority of the neighbors didn't even have their front lights on, and those who did were stingy with the treats—evidence of tightened budgets, higher chocolate prices, wilted demeanors to match the cracked sidewalks and potholed streets. Up against the horizon, the old water tower, bruised and battered, stood like a dead sentry in the burgundy dregs of

sunset.

"You look rather thoughtful," said Esther, a twenty-something housewife who'd come to stand beside Monica as she watched her son, dressed as a cowboy, run up the neighbor's walk.

"Just thinking about things," said Monica, an image of Pat briefly surfacing.

Esther nodded. "Aren't we all. Your mom and I bumped into each other a few days ago. She tells me you're back in public school."

"Yeah."

"That's good. I hope it's going well for you."

"Oh, I have friends there," Monica said, and shrugged. "It's okay, I guess."

"But it's still *school*." Esther chuckled. "I'm sure you'd rather be anywhere else Monday to Friday, eight to three. Back at your gym."

Monica smiled, wished Chris would hurry up so she could move on down the street. "It's not that bad. Really. I have a makeshift training room at home."

"But it's not the same as being on a team, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"Isn't it just typical these days?" Esther wrung her hands. "Everything's so topsy-turvy—all we can do is putter around in our respective niches! Work and home, school and home. Heck, my husband has little Keith all riled up over making the Pee Wee football team, but I'm like, 'Where's the money going to come from, hon?' We've got six credit accounts, and four of them are maxed out. Plus, he wants me to be the one to run Keith back and forth between practice and all that. I told him, 'Look, darling, I can cook and clean all day, or I can play soccer mom, but not both.'"

Monica listened as Esther went on and on, the proverbial suburban housewife, stringy hair, slightly starved look, never enough money.

A premonition? Monica wondered, and was immensely relieved when Chris finally returned, attached himself to her side and announced he was set for the night. He picked through his sack of goodies as she said goodbye to Esther and led him back in the direction of home. She was considering what to do with herself for the rest of the evening when she looked up—and stopped in her tracks.

There was a marked vehicle parked in front of Deborah's house.

Chris, caught off guard, bumped into her face-first. He tried unceremoniously to wipe a smidgen of his facial makeup from her sweatshirt. "Why'd you stop, Monica?"

"I don't know," she responded, a dozen different possibilities running through her head as she willed herself into motion once again, up the street, up the front walk, into the house.

She found them in the dining room, Deborah, her parents, and two adult trick-or-treaters dressed as military officers. They were gathered around the table and conversing intently. When they spotted her in the doorway, the military men fixed her with a pair of appraising stares.

"Monica, dear," Sharon said, smiling broadly. "Come, sit with us—there's news from the NPAA."

Monica took a seat at the table; she held her breath as Deborah, excusing herself, hustled Chris upstairs for his nightly shower.

Sharon introduced the newcomers: "This is Mr. Dunckel and Mr. Godin. Gentlemen, my daughter, Monica."

Each of the men shook Monica's hand in turn. Both sported spotless uniforms and even buzz-cuts.

Dunckel jumped to the heart of the matter: "Ms. Sardinia, in light of recent events involving the women's Patriot team losing several of its best athletes, the NPAA has decided to revamp its entire elite program in time for the forthcoming Olympic year. This entails many changes, one of which is the appointment of Darren Hades as head coach of the women's gymnastics team."

Monica's eyes widened. With the exception of the Alabama Massacre, she'd been avoiding the news, and so hadn't kept up with NPAA affairs—but she *did* know who Darren Hades was. Most gymnasts were gymnasts because of his lore, his performance on Heroes' Day, 2084, where he'd become the sixth person in Olympic history to earn flawless scores on parallel bars and floor.

"Mr. Hades has decided," said Godin, "that the new women's program will best be served by a small, highly-specialized team of six young women fast-tracked for Heroes' Day. As such, it is our duty and honor to inform you that you've been hand-picked to serve as team captain."

Godin's words rang out loud and clear, and Monica's brain processed their meaning—still, she couldn't believe what she was hearing, couldn't believe that her parents hadn't somehow hired the men sitting across from her to sneak over while she was out with Chris—a twisted Halloween prank. She cleared her throat, glanced at Sharon, who was absolutely beaming, about to burst.

"There's paperwork involved," Dunckel continued, "and you'll be required to live and work aboard Olympus Station for a one-year term. Living arrangements and boarding fees will be taken care of, should you accept, and your time with us counts as your obligatory military service."

Silence was inevitable. Monica looked from Dunckel to Godin to Sharon to Mike, found herself completely stopped up, unable to smile or nod or give the slightest acknowledgment. Hope and reason were duking it out, trying to help her decide between cruel Halloween gag and genuine, storybook-style windfall.

"You'll have to forgive her," said Sharon. "She's spent the last two months reintegrating as a commoner. It's been stressful for us all, to say the least, what with the move and all—but she never lost her competitive spirit. She's even kept up with her training. She's been waiting for this day, and now it's come!"

Godin sent an information packet to their phones, with forms to be looked over, signed, and submitted no later than five o'clock the following evening.

"We'll need some time to discuss this," Mike said, grasping Monica's hand. "But rest assured, you'll have your answer by tomorrow."

Monica nodded, a surge of excitement at last cracking the bewilderment. She'd been dreaming of becoming a Patriot since first enrolling at KG—but she hadn't expected the reality to be so anticlimactic, to have what she wanted most after a

lifetime of steady rejection, after two solid months of trying to wean herself from every naive hope she'd ever had. *No way,* she thought to herself. *No way...no way this is real.* And yet there it was: paperwork in her phone, an offer waiting to be accepted.

No freaking way.

Mike and Sharon shook hands with the recruiters, made some last-minute smalltalk before showing them out. Then, for a good while, the Sardinias merely stood on the front step hugging each other, laughing, whooping—completely mad.

Chapter 12

"Pat."

The video call window went live as Pat oriented his phone, framed himself somewhat diagonally. "Yeah?"

"It's me, Monica."

"I can see that," Pat yawned, rubbing his eyes, scratching his head (it looked like he'd been gaming all evening). "What's on your mind?"

So many things! "I've been up all night with my parents. The paperwork's not finished, and I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to be telling this to anyone, but I just have to get it off my chest because I feel like I'm going to explode—"

"You're babbling, toots."

"I know!" Monica laughed, swallowed. "Oh, Pat—I've turned Patriot. I'm going to Olympus!"

Pat gawked, caught somewhere between distrust and genuine curiosity. "I thought you weren't competing anymore."

"I'm not. A couple of NPAA officers literally came to my door and asked if I wanted to join the Patriot team."

"Are you sure they weren't con artists? Did they ask to use the bathroom?"

"They were genuine, Pat. I mean, we're still going to contact the NPAA office directly first thing tomorrow morning, just to confirm, but it's the real deal. I'm still in shock."

A wary grin spread across Pat's face. He looked off-camera for a moment. "I don't believe you. I'm at the NPAA Web site right now and you're still listed as a retired junior."

"Well, duh! We still have to turn in the paperwork."

"Got any proof?"

"I didn't exactly pose for pictures with the recruiters."

"Okay," said Pat. "A test, then. Look me in the eye and tell me, 'Patrick, I am a Patriot athlete.'"

Monica leaned forward, framed herself dead-center. "Patrick, I am a Patriot athlete."

"Now say, 'Patrick, I want you.'"

"Dream on."

"Seriously, be scientific about this, Monica. I need a control statement. Say, 'Patrick, I want you.'"

"Fine. Patrick, I want you. Satisfied?"

"Good. Now say, 'Patrick, I am a Patriot athlete' once more."

Monica gritted her teeth, scowling. “Patrick, I am a Patriot athlete.”

Pat narrowed his eyes, stroked his chin. “Hmm. Very interesting. Both statements seem to be genuine—”

Monica gave him a look.

“—however, as your right eye didn’t twitch during your Patriot statement, I’m guessing you’re telling the truth as you know it.”

“Gee, thanks. That wasn’t humiliating or anything.”

Leaning back, Pat folded one of his arms behind his head. “Don’t mention it—but hey, now that we’ve established the facts, does this mean your picture is going to be on cereal boxes and McDonald’s cups?”

“Well,” said Monica, “I’m going to be on the national team, but that just means I have a chance at competing during the Heroes’ Day events. It all depends on scores, how well I do during training—by the way, my coach is going to be Darren Hades.”

“Darren who?”

“Darren Hades. He was the gymnast who got perfect marks on Heroes’ Day, 2084.”

“Oh, him. I read his bio in history class. Wow, he’s still around?”

“Yeah, dork,” said Monica. “He was only eighteen years old.”

“Oh, right,” said Pat. “I forget that all you Olympic types start your careers when you’re still in diapers.”

“You know the saying: train hard or go home.”

“I thought it was ‘fall hard, die young.’”

Monica yawned, stretched. “The longer you go without sleep, the more sarcastic you get. Did you know that?”

“Do you like me this way, Chalky Cheeks?”

“*Chalky Cheeks?*”

Pat was looking off-screen again. “Yeah, you know, when the girls get prints on their butt cheeks—”

“I’m going to sleep, you pervert,” Monica said, hovering her finger over the end-call button. “Goodnight, Pat.”

“Monica.”

“What?”

“Congratulations on turning Patriot.”

Monica smiled. “Thanks, Pat. That means a lot to me.”

“And thanks for letting me be your first—with the news, I mean.”

“Ugh!” snorted Monica, the double entendre sinking in after a moment. “Goodnight!”

Pat laughed, waved goodbye as he ended the call.

* * *

It was half past midnight when Monica, slipping upstairs for a drink of water, found her mother sitting at the kitchen table.

"Can't sleep?" she asked.

Sharon sighed. "Just going over the fine print."

Monica took ice cubes from the freezer, dropped them into an eight-ounce glass, filled the glass with water from the tank. She sat at the table and offered a sip to Sharon, who politely declined.

"They're really thorough, aren't they?" Sharon murmured as she leaned back in her chair and rested her eyes a moment. "We'll have to sign you over to your new coaches for the year. Legal guardianship until you turn eighteen."

Monica sipped her ice water. "They'll just be my space parents—you and dad will always be my Earth parents."

Sharon chuckled, leaned forward again and swiped some more on her tablet. "Did you read the part about the bodyguard thing?"

"Yes," said Monica with a nod. "It's only natural that there'll be increased security aboard a space station."

"I don't know if I like that."

"I'll probably be safer than I was during that conference in Los Angeles. Do you remember the motel story where that guy with the camera kept bugging us at the swimming pool, and how he even tried to follow Amy into the restroom?"

"Oh, lord, yes," said Sharon. "Thank God Gary was looking after you girls!"

Monica giggled. "Yeah—he sure put that weirdo in his place."

"With a black eye, to boot!"

The two of them shared a moment of mutual laughter. Then Sharon got serious again:

"Really, though. Think about what it's like to live in space. All those people up there and nowhere to go if things get out of hand."

"I've thought about it," Monica said. (She'd read over every piece of information in the NPAA packet, the rules, regulations, and security protocols, and none of it outweighed the basic, obvious truth that even if she did have reservations about going to Olympus, she would never get an opportunity like this again.) "Is it really any different than living on a small continent?"

"Olympus is big, but it's no continent. In the event of an emergency, you can't just grab an inflatable raft and be on your merry way." Sharon looked Monica in the eye. "Then there's the time frame. A whole year away from home, two strangers looking after you, bodyguards following you wherever you go. You'll be spending Christmas away from your family. I know we were excited about this in the heat of the moment, but we have to consider these things."

"I know," Monica said, and took another sip of water, set her glass down and folded her hands together. Her contemplative half wished for a month to make the right decision; her competitive half was dying for morning to come so that they could turn the paperwork in, get the ball rolling. "I want this. You know I've wanted this ever since I mastered my first back handspring. I have to go, mom. I have to give it my best shot, for you and dad and Chris, for the Keenes and for my training partners and my community."

Sharon smiled. She had that "I know my daughter" look in her eyes as she

pushed her seat back and gestured for Monica to give her a hug. Then: “Come. It’s late. Let’s get you a good night’s rest before we sign you over to America.”

Arm in arm, mother and daughter left the kitchen, flicking off the light as they went.

Chapter 13

The NPAA liked to handle its affairs in an efficient manner. Monica had three days to pack her bags and say her goodbyes—it wasn't nearly enough time. However, amidst a myriad of preparations, including being interviewed, getting a physical examination, and having her ID tag updated, she made a point of demanding a ride to Keene's Gymnastics so she could deliver the news of her departure in person.

It was late afternoon. Sharon waited on the periphery as Monica strode into the training room and caught the girls' attention. Everyone gathered around her as she gushed about being drafted—and by Darren Hades himself, no less! The younger girls covered their mouths and went wide-eyed; Sarah and Amy hugged her, cried tears of joy. The Keenes...their responses were surprisingly lukewarm. They paced off to the side, happy to see her, she assumed, but more eager to get on with their training session. Donna congratulated her briefly, and then clapped for everyone to get back on task.

Gary, smiling and waving at Sharon, motioned Monica into his office.

"Is she having 'one of those days?'" Monica asked, leaning against the wall as Gary closed the door.

He ran a hand along the top of his head. "You know Donna. She's never been big on emotional displays."

"You don't seem entirely thrilled either."

"Oh, I'm happy for you—and of course I'm thrilled! I was chattering like a schoolgirl when the NPAA called me for an interview. My little Monica is going to Olympus!"

"Still, there's something you want to say, right?"

Gary sighed. "I suppose the news of your leaving is merely anti-climactic."

"Well, sure it is," said Monica, "but isn't this the goal? Besides the fact that it gets you state funding, you run an elite program so that your athletes will have the skills necessary to compete at the national level—the *international* level. Olympus. Heroes' Day." She frowned. "Why do I get the feeling you'd rather I stay here in Franklin?"

Gary knelt, held Monica's face between his hands. "What is Heroes' Day about?"

"The gathering of Earth's Patriot nations in celebration of the competitive spirit—"

"No, no. That's the program guide definition. What does Heroes' Day *mean*?"

Monica faltered, shrugged. "You mean Patriot Grant stuff? Allocation of resources and all that?"

Letting her go, Gary moved over to the window and gazed out into the parking lot. “Most young people don’t have the sense to ask a question like that in the classroom. They don’t know any better. To today’s youth it’s just a game. Too many of us, and too little to go around. So we compete—we *fight*—for our factories and pastures, our reservoirs and feedstocks, the booty going to the biggest bully on the block. Just a few decades ago it was men and women in fatigues crawling along muddy trenches. Now it’s boys and girls in the gym, in the swimming pool, out on the field.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the Patriot System,” said Monica. “It’s not about who can take what by force anymore, it’s about who can *earn* their global rank.”

Gary sighed, hours of philosophical debate welling behind his eyes as he faced Monica again. “Why do you think I limit myself to three junior elites a season? Why do you think Keene’s Gymnastics is still a small-time club despite the fact that a dozen or so of our girls have turned Patriot in about as many seasons?”

“I always thought it was because you couldn’t afford a bigger gym.”

Gary glared at her. “It changes, Monica. In here, it’s for the sport, it’s for your family and your community. Out there, it’s for your country. Suddenly people you don’t know will heap their expectations upon you. They’ll want to watch you on TV and in person and have you sign photographs. They’ll want to know everything about you, stats, favorites, musical tastes, personal beliefs. They’ll expect the world from you.”

Monica folded her arms, trying to glean the meaning from Gary’s words. She thought of her dinky little burg, the rusted fences and cracked pavement and overgrown lawns. She couldn’t understand why Gary was balking at her becoming a Patriot. Certainly he didn’t seem this down-tempo whenever his other girls made the cut. “I’m a lieutenant in the United States Army now. I have a chance at making things better for my family and my country. I can handle the fanfare.”

Gary smiled wanly. “Remember what I told you the night of our last barbecue?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re a talented athlete, and a terrific mentor. We didn’t call you ‘Big Sister’ just for the sake of giving you a title. You always made a difference here, you always helped things run smoothly. You should know that when I retire, I can easily see myself turning the gym over to you. Donna agrees with me.”

Monica raised her eyebrows.

“How about it? You want to be a coach one day, kiddo? Run your own club?”

“I...I don’t know what to say.” The idea hadn’t crossed her mind. She’d been focusing on so many other things during the last two months—namely survival in the suburbs. “I’d have to think it over.”

“Well, you’d be great at it.” Gary crossed the office, heading for the door. “Oh, but don’t you listen to me, now. I have my own crotchety ideas about the sport, but this is your time. You’ve earned it.” As he passed Monica, he leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Promise you’ll write to us while you’re up there dancing among the stars.”

"I promise," Monica said, and stepped out of the way as Gary left the office, resumed his work with Donna and the girls.

"What was that about?" Sharon asked as they returned to the car.

"Bad day," Monica replied, climbing into the passenger seat and buckling herself in.

"That poor man. He always looks several hours short of a good night's sleep. At least your training partners seemed to be in good spirits."

"Oh, you know Gary. He's got his no-nonsense way of looking at things. That's why we picked him in the first place."

"I thought we picked him because of the family discount," said Sharon, jokingly.

"You mean to tell me my elite career was the result of a *bargain buy*?"

Sharon started the car. "It's paid off, hasn't it?"

"That's the Patriot spirit, mom." Monica laughed and turned on the radio, tapped her fingers on the dashboard and hummed along to a somewhat familiar pop tune. In the back of her mind a strangely emotive feeling surfaced, if only for a moment, as they pulled out of the KG lot and onto the road. She told herself it was no different, the nostalgia, from what she'd been feeling last week, before her recruitment. Still, she was missing her friends already, albeit now for more prestigious reasons.

It was a pleasant surprise to find Pat grinding the curb in front of Deborah's house.

"Hi, Monica," he said, gathering his skateboard under his arm and strolling alongside the car as Sharon parked. "Hi, Mrs. Sardinia."

"Hello, Patrick."

Monica got out, waited with Pat beside the driveway until Sharon, nodding and smiling smugly, went inside the house.

"Running some last-minute errands?" asked Pat once they were alone.

"Yeah," replied Monica. "What's up with you?"

"I had to see you off, of course. Or were you planning on sneaking away to Olympus without giving your Big Brother a big hug?"

Monica responded with a polite embrace.

"I also wanted to give you this," said Pat. Letting her go, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of woven bracelets.

"You sentimental fool," Monica said, accepting hers and noticing that her name had been stitched into the fabric. "I didn't know you could sew."

"I can't. I used the nanofibre machine at the mall. I hope that doesn't disqualify me."

"I'll let it pass," Monica laughed. She fastened the bracelet around her wrist. The letters (or, rather, the color of the fabric) rearranged themselves and began scrolling out a message, ticker-style: I FIT! NOW YOU'LL NEVER BE RID OF ME! MUAHAHA!

"I programmed in a couple of phrases," said Pat. "Nothing special, but maybe if you're having a bad day you'll get a laugh or two."

"It's nice," said Monica. "Thanks."

Pat nodded, turned and looked down the street. "It'll be a year the next time we stand here like this—or wherever it is your folks get settled in."

"I'm sure the time will fly by."

"It'll be different. We'll be eighteen. Can you believe it? Almost halfway to forty!"

"This year's felt more like six months—and next year will probably be more like four."

Pat started tapping the heel of his foot against the ground. "My dad's going to have me work at the shop next year. Earn some of my own cash fixing cars and doing paint jobs. I guess it's kind of cool to be part of the family business. Something to fall back on."

Stepping beside him, Monica gazed down the street as well. It may have been presumptuous on her part, but she had the feeling Pat was, on some subconscious level, trying to justify his own progress—still a commonplace citizen, but advancing enough in his own circle so that he wouldn't fall off her radar once she'd been living as a Patriot elite for a few months. *Hoping that maybe when I come back after my term we can pick up where we left off…hoping that maybe I'll be ready for him then.*

She reached out and grasped his hand. "Thanks for coming, Pat."

"No prob, sis."

Chapter 14

Her final night before leaving for Olympus, Monica got absolutely no sleep. Most of it was pre-meet jitters, anticipation accumulated during three days' worth of frenzied preparations for the transition back into competitive athletics—and in quite the unorthodox fashion, too, as she was skipping right over her obligatory term at the National Training Center to spend an entire year aboard Olympus (most Patriots only trained aboard the station for two to three weeks prior to the Heroes' Day festivities). And she was doing it without her teammates, without her club coach.

There was also the matter of Gary's office speech. His reaction to her turning Patriot was quite perplexing, and hadn't been at all what she'd expected. He hadn't been the same coach she'd grown up with, shouting and jumping up and down ecstatically whenever she nailed a conference routine.

But, she told herself between tossing and turning, *he's entitled to his opinions. He's only looking out for my best interests.*

When dawn finally came, she shut off her alarm clock and slipped from her bed, moving quietly through the darkness, checking her bags, snagging one last mental freeze-frame of her little workout nook, humble as it was, to take with her once the sun was up and the day began.

A knock at the doorway.

She found her mother waiting by the threshold. It was obvious she hadn't slept, either.

"Six o'clock," Sharon said, yawning, smiling. "Better get dibs on the bathroom before the guys do."

Monica padded upstairs. In the bathroom, she went through her usual grooming routine in a daze. The morning seemed to unfold around her of its own accord.

Breakfast was quiet, surreal. The only one who did any real talking was Chris. Monica, Mike, and Sharon merely exchanged anxious glances, the unspoken question lingering on their minds: Is this real and not just a dream?

At seven o'clock, the NPAA shuttle pulled up out front. Monica stood on the front step and endured a barrage of hugs and kisses from her parents, from Deborah as Dunckel and Godin stored her luggage away.

"Make us proud," said Mike.

"Bring America the gold," said Sharon.

"Oh, sweetie," sobbed Deborah. "How I'm going to miss you!"

Chris, the last to offer his goodbyes, wrapped his arms around Monica and said,

"When it's time for the floor exercise, I want you to do that break-dancing trick where you flare!"

Everyone laughed. Then it was time to go. Monica strode down the walk and got into the shuttle. She situated herself in the passenger seat, fastening the harness as per Dunckel's instructions (riding in such a vehicle was a new experience for her, as only military and various government officials were allowed to operate personal-sized craft—civilians were, for all intents and purpose, grounded). The shuttle rose into the air, Monica's family watching and waving below. In a moment, they were tiny specks lost between the patchwork rooftops.

"We'll reach the Milwaukee Skyport in about ten minutes," explained Dunckel, aligning the shuttle with the nearest skyway. "There'll be a modest wait, and then it's on to Olympus Station."

Godin glanced over his shoulder. "Ever ridden the skyways before?"

Monica shook her head, unable to reply, for the back of her throat had tightened up, and her palms had become sweaty—one of her latent fears had decided to rear its ugly head at a most inconvenient time.

"Ms. Sardinia?"

Clutching the seat with her hands, Monica closed her eyes and quietly asked, "Could we close the windows, please?"

"What's wrong, Monica?" There was concern in Godin's voice.

"I...I don't like flying."

"Ah, first time on a personal shuttle?"

Of course, Monica had flown on commercial airliners many times before, to and from various national conferences, but even then, at a mere 35,000 feet, she'd spent all her preflight time negotiating for the seat farthest from the window. "Yeah."

"Jay," Godin said. "Dim the windows, please."

Opening one of her eyes a crack, Monica saw the windows (all but Dunckel's, as he was driving) go opaque.

"Better?" asked Godin.

"Better," said Monica.

Godin chuckled. "I never heard of a gymnast who's afraid of heights."

"I'm not afraid of heights—and I'm not afraid of flying. I'm afraid of *crashing*."

Dunckel burst out laughing. "Well put."

"All right, then, Ms. Sardinia," said Godin, facing forward in his seat. "We fly to the skyport with windows dimmed."

* * *

By God's grace, the shuttle made it to the skyport without a hiccup, and Monica was delivered to the proper terminal to await delivery to Olympus. The skyport was much like a terrestrial airport, except here it was mostly military and industry folk eating at the restaurants, browsing the gift shops. A good many people were in uniform.

Godin took the liberty of buying Monica a soda. Then he showed her around, explained how the skyport was kept afloat by a fleet of turbines that ran day and night. The windows offered a splendid angel's-eye view of the Earth below (which, funnily enough, didn't seem to bother Monica as it had during the shuttle ride).

"You'll probably want to avoid the viewports aboard Olympus, though," Godin said. "You don't notice the station's rotation when you're going about your daily routine, but it can be dizzying looking out the windows. Even the best of us can get motion sickness if we're not careful."

When it came time to board the shuttle to Olympus, Godin and Dunckel sat with Monica, each in turn offering their assurance that the ride would be brief and uneventful. Thankfully, this time around, there were no windows. Otherwise, the interior of the shuttle resembled the cabin of a very neat commercial airliner, with video screens embedded in the seat backs. All luggage and personal items were stored in a separate compartment.

"Because," Godin explained, winking, "we'll be weightless for a short while."

Monica smiled, swallowed—wondered what she'd gotten herself into. Checking and double-checking her harness, she watched a random sitcom for the duration of the flight, and only took her eyes off the screen after Godin had informed her that the ship was docked and all was well.

Olympus, Monica knew from her planetside studies, was a torus-type space station arranged around a central docking hub. Long spokes connected the hub to the torus itself, where the station's 10,000 officers lived and worked. Gravity was provided via centrifugal force, sunlight via an intricate mirror system. Interior real estate was arranged into "belts", which were further divided into "stripes" dedicated to military, scientific, business, industrial, and recreational endeavors. During Heroes' Day festivities, the promenade belt (landscaped to resemble a sprawling valley freeze-framed in eternal springtime) often took on upwards of 80,000 additional guests.

However, as impressive as its architectural specifications were, Olympus wasn't perfect. In the exterior photographs and video footage the station was a jewel suspended in the sky, a starlight Olympic dream twinkling in the night. On the inside...well, most space stations still in commission after twenty years were vulnerable to wear and tear, and Olympus, grand as it was, had not been immune to the passage of time.

Not that there was an opportunity to stand around and pick at scabs, as Sharon liked to say. As soon as Monica's shuttle docked, she and the other passengers were directed to a screening area, where a team of armed security officers patted her down, waved their wands over her front and back, head to toe. Once cleared, she was handed her backpack and duffel bag and was allowed to ride one of the golf cart-looking transports into the station's outer ring. Dunckel and Godin hastily directed her through a series of interconnecting corridors, all smooth, almost glossy floors and ceilings, and faux-stone walls with niches bearing mythological reliefs or sprays of suspiciously healthy ferns. Everything was impeccably clean, but there was evidence of strain. Loose wiring hung in certain places, bulkhead panels were

often missing, and the air was several degrees too chilly.

At the entrance to a wide, low-ceilinged corridor with doors lined up on either side (personal quarters, Monica assumed), her escorts bid her farewell and turned her over to a tall, hulking African man who introduced himself as Lieutenant Tompkins.

"I'm the security coordinator for this stripe," he said, shaking her hand and leading her down the corridor. "You'll have to excuse the informality of your arrival—usually they have a welcome committee for the teams, but as you probably know, there have been some changes made recently, many of which involve my serving as bellboy and/or doorman."

Monica smiled.

"Anyhow, this is your home stripe. Here you'll find your quarters, bathroom facilities, and a commons room. Your coach will explain the particulars—ah, here we go." Tompkins slowed as he approached one of the cabin doors—in front of which stood a chic-looking woman holding a laptop computer and a camera.

Linda Baimbridge.

"Here she is!" Linda squealed, coming to life as if on cue. "My proud little team captain—look at those darling locks!" She darted forward, stooping slightly so that she could feather Monica's hair. "This is going to look *so* nice once it grows out. Oh, aren't you the most adorable little thing!"

Monica had been briefed about Linda, her team's publicist, ahead of time, and so wasn't entirely unfamiliar with the woman—though she was ill-prepared for the sheer amount of personality coming at her full-force. Five-foot-five, mid-to-late thirties, still able to fit nicely into denim jacket, halter top, and stretch pants, Linda's social abundance left Monica speechless as her hand was pumped, her picture taken, her cheek pinched.

"Welcome aboard," Tompkins said, once Linda had finished her preliminaries. He waved the cabin door open and did his best to hide a smirk as he ushered Monica inside.

Three of her teammates (who'd evidently arrived only moments before) were in the process of unpacking their things. There was Lena Trotter, a blue-eyed brunette; Kristen O'Brien, freckle-faced and red-haired; Alana Chang, tiny, elf-like, probably asked several times a day to confirm her age and Patriot eligibility. Their wrangler: Coach Stacie, forty-ish, brusque, to-the-point—to be addressed as "Coach Stacie" at all times. She shook Monica's hand and instructed her to get situated while she conversed with Linda and Tompkins out in the corridor.

"She's always like that, from what I can tell," explained Lena, once the door closed. "They say working with Darren Hades will do that to you."

"Are you talking about Coach Stacie or Ms. Baimbridge?" asked Kristen.

Lena giggled. "Maybe both, now that I think about it."

"Where is Coach Hades?" Monica asked.

"Probably hiding in the training room," said Lena. "I think he did a single planetside interview before flying up here for his one-year term."

"He doesn't like publicity," Kristen said.

"How funny," said Monica. "Have any of you met him yet?"

The girls all shook their heads.

Lena said, "I researched him on the Internet."

"He's cute," Kristen said. "He doesn't look like he's almost thirty-five."

Everyone cooed. Even Alana, the quiet one, was caught blushing.

Monica set her bag down, glanced around the room, which was quite sparse. There were bunks on either side, with cubbies built into the bulkhead beside each bed; a desk with a computer terminal sat centered against the rear wall. "Who goes where?" she asked.

"We all agreed," said Lena, "that since you're team captain, you should be the first to pick which bunk you want."

Kristen and Alana nodded their heads and waited patiently—and in that moment, Monica realized she really was team captain, the Big Sister to two-thirds of the United States' precocious Patriot team. There was no way any of her new roommates would be turning sixteen before the start of the new season. (In Alana's case, Monica was certain she wouldn't be smelling birthday candles for at least another six months.)

She chose the bottom-right bunk.

"Is the rest of the team aboard?" she asked, testing the mattress with her knuckles.

Lena nodded. "It's just us, Jackie Davisson, and Britney Lawler. They're the stars. They share their own room."

"I'm kind of nervous," Kristen said. She'd fished a plastic token from her pocket and was preparing to flip to see who got the top-left bunk. "They've never put together a Patriot team like this before, forgoing the National Training Center and all. And spending an entire year up here with Jackie and Britney...I mean, you see them in the news all the time—Jackie's made the cover of *The NPAA Journal* three times this year. She's like a supermodel. Britney, too. International superstars. And you, with your national rank through the roof and all..."

Alana looked like she might be sick.

Christ, thought Monica. *The NPAA really has wiped the slate clean—and me, the babysitter.* Not one of her new training partners was familiar, either. She might have seen Lena at the National Convention earlier in the year, but it was doubtful any of the girls had had much national experience prior to their being drafted for service aboard Olympus. They certainly didn't have any international experience, and from the looks on their faces, they probably hadn't been away from their hometowns for more than a weekend at a time. Even then, they'd had their club coaches with them.

"Monica?" asked Lena (she'd gotten bottom bunk, left).

"Yeah?"

"No offense, but...you're so much older than the rest of us. I checked your NPAA profile, and, well, how come you're—I mean, *were*—a junior? How come you never joined the Patriot team?"

"Because," Monica answered, "I was never asked."

"Never?"

"The NPAA has its method of selection, I guess—but I'm here now. We all are."

Kristen, top bunk, left, grinned. "Think you'll make it through the whole year?"

"For the NAU?" Monica left her bunk, walked over to where the other girls were standing. She held out her hand, palm down. "You bet."

The others took the hint and slapped their hands atop Monica's. All at once, they cheered, "For America!"

Coach Stacie entered the room. She carried a large bundle in her arms.

"Your station uniforms," she said, distributing accordingly. "Sizes have been taken from your personal profiles—if something doesn't fit, let me know and I'll have Wardrobe adjust it for you."

Monica unpacked her uniform. It consisted of a green, one-piece flight suit, with the standard Olympus star pattern splashed across the shoulders and upper arms. There was also a pair of rugged-looking boots.

"Country colors are printed across the back," Stacie continued. "Rank insignia can be found on the collar. As specialists aboard Olympus, you've been granted lieutenant-Patriot status. Don't abuse the privilege. Your home stripe is NAU-3C. This is room 15. Remember that. Outside these quarters, you are to be in uniform at all times. The exception, of course, is when you're training with Coach Hades or myself, or when you're off-duty. We'll review station policy more thoroughly later. Right now, as the press have set up in the assembly room, I need you all spruced up and in uniform. The bathroom facilities for this stripe are out the door and to your left. Be respectful of our sister nations by not spending an overt amount of time in the shower or in front of the mirror. All extended grooming activities should be performed here, in your quarters. There's a mirror behind this panel here—" Stacie pressed a button beside the door; a portion of the wall replaced itself with a full-length mirror. "—and a clothing sanitizer built into the bulkhead to my left. Expect the custodian to come by between nine o'clock and noon daily. This normally won't be of concern, as you'll be training during those hours. Regardless, make sure all your personal belongings are stored away in your cubbies. The bots can sometimes have trouble telling trinkets from trash. Understood?"

Everyone nodded.

Chapter 15

The assembly room was wide and low-ceilinged, with rows of seats sprawling down a mild slope that gave way to the podium area. There, a table wired with an armada of video cameras and microphones had been set up. Each of the girls in Monica's group was given a name tag and directed to sit quietly until the U.S. team was called for its interview (Stacie, Linda, and a pair of Tompkins' men stood in the aisle).

Monica moved down the row. Her seat was adjacent to that of the tallest (and likely oldest) of a group of Canadian boys who'd filed in moments before.

"Gymnast?" asked the boy, paying her a friendly nod as she took her seat.

"Yeah," she replied, and moved to fasten her name tag to the breast of her uniform. When she slipped, and the tag started to fall, the boy reached out and grabbed it, presented it to her with a smile.

"Thanks," she said, blushing.

"You're welcome. I'm John. John Matusik."

"Monica Sardinia." She shook John's hand. "Are you new here, too?"

John put on a scowl, though not without humor. "Not as new as you. No, my team has been aboard for almost two weeks. The news media are just getting around to us."

"Wow," said Monica. "Isn't that kind of careless considering the circumstances?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I listen to the coaches talking, and it's all, 'If the U.S. gets to train aboard Olympus, so do we!' It's a real big entitlement thing, but you never see any stories about it on the news. The media seems to be the last to pick up on these kinds of subtleties."

"Right?" Monica flitted her tongue. "It's only *Heroes' Day*, after all."

"One thing is for sure: It's going to get crowded once every eligible country has its teams training up here."

"Are you nervous?"

John shrugged. "Yes and no. This is supposed to be an important season for the NAU, so I guess in that respect I'm anxious to do my part—but I'm not going to lose any sleep over it. I'm only here because my father owns the gym where I train. I know my stuff, but I wasn't first choice for the team—last minute injuries in the roster, you know. Whether or not any of us makes it past the pre-season, my father thinks our presence here will look good in the headlines—and who wouldn't want the attention?"

Monica frowned, unsure if John was being serious or if he was merely satirizing

his country's outlook. "What kind of attitude is that?"

"I'm not making excuses," John said. "Nor am I setting unreasonable goals. I plan to excel within the boundaries I've set for myself."

"Oh." Monica thought it an odd way of looking at the sport, setting boundaries instead of goals, but she nodded anyway, and was on the verge of saying something else when one of the adults seated nearby—John's coach (and father, judging from the striking resemblance)—leaned over and tapped him heavily on the shoulder.

"Face forward, John," he said.

John did as he was told, but not before rolling his eyes and winking at Monica.

Stifling a giggle, Monica faced forward as well.

The news folk did their thing. After a long while of sitting and listening to half-heard questions and comments involving several of the other nations, Linda guided the U.S. girls from their seats and down the aisle, to the podium.

The interview was a new experience for Monica. Back on Earth, juniors didn't get press time, nor were their performances recorded beyond small groups of friends and family who used their phones or brought home video cameras with them to the various conferences. There was makeup to be applied, lighting to be adjusted—and Stacie, quite the bundle of nerves, didn't let her girls answer a single question without making a fuss.

It started innocently enough: Monica and the rest of the team situated themselves at the table, with Stacie as the centerpiece (Monica and Lena to her left, Kristen and Alana to her right, Linda waiting offstage). The first question was from a bespectacled, slick-haired reporter named Dan Goodberg.

"Hello, Monica," Dan said, smiling in a disarming fashion.

"Hello," replied Monica, smiling back.

"You're going to be eighteen in April, correct?"

"Yes."

"That makes you the oldest member of the U.S. Patriot team."

Monica shrugged. "It's not too much of a big deal. I used to serve as 'Big Sister' at my club back home. I know what it's like to be the old woman."

Polite laughter reverberated throughout the assembly room.

Another of the reporters stood, introduced herself, and asked, "Monica, how does it feel to be on the Patriot team, and as team captain, no less?"

Monica said, "Oh, it's exciting—it's just about the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me."

Another question from Dan (who'd remained standing): "I would think so, what with your meeting Darren Hades and all."

"Well, actually, I haven't met him just yet—"

Stacie cleared her throat, cutting Monica off. "Mr. Hades is currently occupied elsewhere."

"I can see that," muttered Dan, smirking.

In her peripheral vision, Monica saw Stacie's demeanor darken a notch or two.

A third reporter stood, stepped slightly forward. Addressing Monica, she asked,

"You recently came out of retirement, yes?"

"Yeah," Monica replied tentatively (Stacie had started to lean forward, and looked like she had something to say, though she kept her silence).

"Do you feel you're ready to jump back into the sport as a Patriot elite?"

Stacie appropriated the nearest microphone. "Monica has signed a one-year contract, as have all our girls. Mr. Hades and myself are confident she will see her term through."

The reporter smiled. "I don't question Monica's—or any of the other girls'—commitment. I was referring to her physical state."

Stacie moved to deliver another rebuttal, but not before Monica (hoping to diffuse a potential P.R. bomb) answered, "I've never stopped training. I have a small gym at home where I've been doing all my conditioning, usually between four and six o'clock, after school."

Stacie's expression softened just a little.

Thankfully, the next reporter decided to address one of the other girls—namely Alana (who looked least prepared to answer to a room full of strangers):

"Will you be upgrading your vault, as alluded to by your former coach during the National Convention?"

"I'm not sure," Alana said, her voice tiny, fairy-like. She looked to Stacie for guidance. "I guess it would be up to my new coaches."

Dan Goodberg, still standing, his list of questions at the ready: "You haven't met Mr. Hades, either?"

"No."

"Tell us, Alana, dear: How confident are you going into the new competitive season without a game plan, without having met your coach-to-be and savior of the NAU's ailing national rank?"

"It's only our first day," Monica offered, noting poor Alana's "Help me!" expression. "We haven't even seen the training room yet—"

"Er, what Monica means to say," said Stacie, cutting in again, "is that Mr. Hades prefers to spend his time focusing on his athletes, in the gym, instead of giving interviews—"

"Yet," pushed Dan, "he seems perfectly at ease ignoring *this* particular shipment of recruits—"

"As has already been stated, the girls have only just arrived, but will be properly incorporated into the team shortly. Now, if there are no more questions, Mr. Goodberg—"

"One more," said Dan, smiling that devious smile of his (all around him, the flock of reporters seemed content to watch their colleague stoke the fire).

Stacie was seething. She'd obviously done battle with the likes of Dan Goodberg before. "If it's appropriate—"

Not waiting for a complete acknowledgment, Dan asked, "What about the NPAA's decision to return to the 'one size fits all' attitude, having one coach handle the national team without input from each individual athlete's coach?"

"It's obvious from the United States' three-term slump that that attitude is

invalid. What we need is consistency across the roster—"

"Or exclusivity." Dan stepped forward so that he was very nearly resting his elbows on the podium. "Is there any truth to the rumor that Hades is compiling a skeleton-team, focusing solely on his two top athletes—planning a pony show for Heroes' Day?"

"That's absurd!" Stacie exclaimed, looking as if she'd been slapped in the face. "Mr. Goodberg, are you here simply to hand out wild accusations?"

Dan held up his hands and backed off. "My apologies if I've hit a sensitive spot."

There was an uncomfortable silence as he took his seat and the next reporter stepped up to bat—which wasn't really necessary, because Dan had already asked the questions everyone else had been too polite to ask. Now, all that was left was the fluff: the girls' stats, their favorites, their opinions on which current pop-culture icon was cutest. When these sorts of topics were exhausted, the U.S. team was excused from the podium, and the next team was prepped.

John caught Monica on the way out.

"You're quite popular with the newsmen," he whispered in passing.

"Monica," Stacie barked, pointing toward the exit. "On task, please."

John giggled, waved goodbye.

* * *

The remainder of the day was spent learning protocol.

"The door scanners are coded to only accept commands from those with clearance," Stacie said while instructing the girls on how to get around the station with the proper hand gestures. "Your rank grants you access to all civilian-level compartments, as well as a few privileged areas, such as your home stripe, the training rooms, and many sections of the promenade."

In the cafeteria, she showed Monica how to work the food kiosks. "As team captain, you'll be responsible for properly guiding your teammates' eating habits whenever Hades or myself are not around."

"Banana cream pies for all," Monica joked.

Stacie frowned and returned the team to their room. She sat with the girls and went over timetables, as well as proper etiquette regarding training sessions. By the time she was through, it was knock-off.

"Not you," Stacie said, gesturing for Monica to follow her out into the corridor.

She complied, stepping away from the door and letting it slide shut. "Yes, Coach Stacie?"

"You need to be more aware of your responsibilities."

Monica blinked. "Sorry?"

"The press conference—it was a disaster."

"I don't understand—"

"That Goodberg fellow had his way with us and then tossed us aside. Who

knows what sorts of things he and his cronies are putting into their stories—"

"I could've handled the questions," Monica said. *And it might have helped if you didn't flip out every chance you got.*

Stacie glanced over her shoulder, as if someone might be eavesdropping. When she looked at Monica again, there was a grave expression on her face (well, more so than what was typical for her). "This is probably the only free moment we'll have before winter break, so listen closely. It's not about me and you. It's about us versus them. We have an image to uphold, and whether or not you agree with it, it's your duty as a Patriot to uphold that image, for team and for country. Those newshounds are the enemy, always feeling along the seams for cracks. Never be forthcoming with more than a simple answer to any and all questions. Give them fluff instead of facts. Anything that has to do with our training philosophies, our attitudes as Patriots, you let me or Coach Hades answer. Is that understood?"

Monica nodded. "Yes," she said.

"Good. Now, make sure the lights are out by 21:00—we begin tomorrow, bright and early."

Stacie turned and left.

Inside her quarters, Monica sat on her bunk and sighed.

"What was that about?" Kristen asked. (She and the others had swapped their uniforms for shorts, sweats, tees.)

It was difficult to understand Stacie's motives. Certainly the woman wasn't anything like she'd expected—Olympus wasn't anything like she'd expected. Regardless, Monica knew it was her duty to keep her teammates at ease. Darren Hades' right-hand woman may have fumbled her first impression, but that didn't mean she wasn't just having a bad day (though it would be satisfyingly easy for Monica to simply shake her head and say, "Coach Stacie is a bitch!").

It's only our first day, she reminded herself. *The dust has to settle.* Given time, she was sure Stacie would mellow out.

Given time.

Chapter 16

The homesickness didn't hit that first night aboard Olympus. Everyone was too wired, too excited, too exhausted to sleep. Bedtime wasn't wasted, however. Without Stacie hovering over them, Monica and her new roommates could do all the gushing and babbling they'd had to forgo throughout the day. They swapped stories, traded ideals. Eventually, at some obscure point in the early morning, everyone returned to their bunks and got what little sleep there was to be had before the new day began.

05:00 came hard and fast. It seemed like Monica had barely closed her eyes when suddenly Coach Stacie was breezing into the room, clapping her hands, and shaking everyone from their beds.

"Alarm off," she said as she brought up the lights.

Monica yawned and swung her legs over the side of her bunk. She exchanged brief glances with the other girls, who appeared to be just as clueless as she was concerning their being roused an hour early.

"Coach Hades," said Stacie, assuming an authoritative stance in front of the door, "would like to make an early assessment. You have five minutes to get changed and to have your bags ready."

Monica left her bunk, began preparing along with her teammates. "We're supposed to get bathroom time," she said.

"This is the international space station," said Stacie. "Having a new, preemptive Olympic training program means having upwards of 10,000 athletes vying for the same space. Adjustments must be made, lest we waste taxpayer resources standing in line for the toilet. Besides, there are restroom facilities at the gym."

Monica started to protest again, but Lena, who was standing nearest, nudged her in the side and gave her a look as she reached for her uniform. Kristen and Alana followed suit, so that by the time Monica had finally gotten dressed, the others were waiting and ready to go.

(Though Stacie didn't offer any hints, Monica knew on the way out that she'd earned herself a deduction of some kind—she would have to keep her moves polished, she realized. In and out of the gym.)

Tompkins was in the corridor. He had two security officers with him. Their name tags read "Kim" and "Cross."

"Good morning, ladies," Tompkins greeted, bowing slightly.

Kristen yawned.

Taking the lead, Stacie directed her troop down the corridor. There were other NAU members up and about, many carrying towels and toothbrushes as they

headed toward the bathroom. A few smiled or nodded.

During the ride into the promenade belt, Monica turned to Tompkins and asked, "So, you're our bodyguard?"

"I prefer 'personal escort,'" Tompkins replied, and winked. "Sounds much better, doesn't it?"

Monica smiled. She liked Tompkins—especially amidst this early-hour abundance of bloodshot eyes and puffy faces—and gave him an extra point in her mental score book.

For the remainder of the ride, she sat quietly and took in the sights. The view was spectacular, with the "morning" sunlight filtering through the mirror system above and illuminating the gently sloping landscape. There were buildings, trees, grass, a wide watercourse—the torus was a slice of the Earth encapsulated in space for safe keeping.

"Look," Lena whispered, pointing off into the distance, where the Olympic Arena sat proud on its hilltop. This got the girls smiling, winking at each other, looks of, *I can't believe I'm actually here!* on their faces.

The transport dropped the team off outside an NAU training lot, which contained about half a dozen converted warehouses speckled between stacks of concrete blocks, piles of lumber, and gatherings of bulldozers and cranes. The entrance to the lot was guarded by a small gaggle of security officers who waved their wands, checked their rosters, and motioned Monica's group inside.

The gym itself was nearly five times the size of the Keenes', and the equipment was untarnished, the paint unchipped. Back at KG, the air-conditioning system had never worked; here, the air was crisp and cool, enough to raise goose flesh on Monica's arms—but she knew it would feel good once she was warmed up.

Tompkins and his men took up post on the perimeter as Stacie led the girls to the washroom. There, Monica understood Hades' desire to get an early start, as several members of the Canadian and Mexican teams were already availing themselves of the showers, sinks, and mirrors. In another hour or two, the place would be crammed with people, virtually inaccessible.

"There'll always be a reporter or two lurking on the fringes," Stacie explained. "You need to get used to looking your best, even in training. I want your complexions clear and your smiles bright."

There was little room for modesty. Nozzles were lined up in a row. It wasn't as eloquent as Monica would have liked, but she made do. The other girls followed along like little ducklings, not saying much as they showered. Once they were spruced up, in their leotards, their hair scrunchied (or, in Monica's case, pinned appropriately out of the way), they exited the washroom and presented themselves to Stacie, who nodded approvingly and led them back out into the training area. Jackie Davisson and Britney Lawler, who'd been delivered during the interim, and who were already gussied up and ready to go, sat at the edge of the podium killing time on their phones.

"Coach Hades will be along shortly," Stacie said, glancing at her wristwatch. She stepped onto the podium to check the various apparatus. "Wait quietly."

Monica, Lena, Kristen, and Alana set their gym bags down and sat alongside Jackie and Britney. Since neither of the girls offered more than an obligatory nod, Monica took the initiative and introduced herself, her roommates.

Jackie, her sun-kissed complexion and wheat field locks even more dazzling in person, removed one of her earbuds. Sizing up the new Patriot team with a lukewarm glance that lingered on Alana, she said to Monica, "Wow, you have a lot of work to do, don't you?"

Her question was posed so matter-of-factly she couldn't have meant any insult. Nevertheless, Monica felt the heat rising beneath her cheeks. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Everyone's so...*new*," Jackie said. "Well, not you—you're the veteran, of course. But *them*...wow."

Monica had only known her roommates for a day, and had absolutely no idea what their work ethic was like. Still, her instinct was to stick up for them. "They're good workers. They wouldn't be here otherwise. And anyway, we're *all* new. We *all* have a lot of work ahead of us."

Jackie shook her head. "Britney and me, we're the specialists. You're the all-arounders."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Darren will be working with me and Britney as the front-liners, and Brenda will be working with you girls as support."

"Brenda?"

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Brenda Stacie. Your coach."

Again, Jackie seemed to be speaking matter-of-factly, with no more guile than that of a six-year-old blatantly pointing out her father's bald spot in front of company. But for an international competitor, she had little of the acquired social grace Monica had found to be common among elite athletes, junior or senior.

Keeping her smile, Monica asked, "Anything we should know about life with Hades and Stacie?"

"This is it," replied Jackie, reseating her earbud and clicking through her playlist. "Watching and waiting—oh, and if there's time, we do a little training."

Britney snickered, bobbed her head to whatever tune was blaring through her earbuds.

Monica waited, watched the other teams warming up at various spots around the training room, the girls in their sleeveless leotards, the boys in socks and shorts. When Darren Hades strolled out into the open, more than a few heads turned in his direction—if not because of who he was, then because of how rare it was to see him as a living, breathing entity (and not just a still photograph or video clip posted on his NPAA profile page). Dark-haired, broad-shouldered, handsome, he possessed a boyish sort of charisma that had Monica swooning inwardly despite her best efforts.

All earbuds and wandering gazes disappeared as Hades came to stand over Team USA, clipboard in hand, eagle eyes looking the girls over.

Monica sat, listened, the butterflies fluttering madly in her stomach.

After his visual inspection, Hades launched into the obligatory pep speech: "Heroes' Day is almost a year away—an eternity. And yet I can guarantee you the time between now and then will absolutely *fly*. As you all know, the beginning of each competitive season is the fiercest in terms of scores, national rankings. Clubs from all over the country are touting their best for a crack at the Patriot team. I don't have to tell you that, due to an unfortunate series of events, we've decided to re-structure our game plan. Your scores have gotten you a pre-approved membership—you are specialists aboard Olympus, and your teammates are your coworkers. You are America's Heroes. Our time together, as well as your performance at December's Pre-Season Assessment meet, will determine whether or not you keep the position. You are professional athletes. This is your job, your service to your country. Intra-team friendship can be useful, but professionalism is paramount."

Out of the corner of her eye, Monica caught Jackie feigning a yawn as she shot Britney a bored look. Obviously they'd heard this lecture before.

"Two-thirds of you," Hades continued, pacing, "are without international experience. This is okay. As I said, the NPAA is trying new things. Developing your experience over the coming months will undoubtedly prove more worthwhile than having to reshape old skills, old habits. You will learn to work as a team, and not just as six individual gymnasts who happen to be competing together." He gestured for Monica to stand up, and had her face the others as he gripped her shoulders. "Monica is your team captain. She's racked up some of the most solid numbers we've ever seen at the national level. Despite her inexperience overseas, her demeanor, her reaction to her mistakes is what caught my eye during the recruitment process." Hades let her go, gestured for her to sit down. "I've assembled this particular team because today's sport calls for a balance of pep and performance, pretty smiles and perfect lines. Each of you has a super-power: Jackie, your tumbling skills; Britney, your bars work; Monica, your consistency. And so forth. I have every intention of seeing this group through to next year's National and International Conventions, and on to Heroes' Day. However, my intentions amount to nothing if you are unwilling or unprepared to give it your everything. I don't have to remind you that at this level of competition, every tenth of a point matters. Technical ability cannot overshadow artistic presentation, nor can artistic presentation be used to mask an obvious lack of skill. You need to comprise the best elements of competition in your routines: conflict, struggle, resolution. You are performers. Olympus is your stage. Let's put on one heck of a show."

Monica bit her lip, unsure of what she'd just heard, of what exactly Hades was trying to convey between all the fluff besides reinforcing the usual "work hard, mind your instructors" attitude—not that she cared all that much at the moment. Coaches always had big, sometimes overly-ambitious ideals, but in the end they all wanted the same thing from their athletes: obedience, repetition, results.

Hades talked for a few minutes longer, dispensing with the more mundane details regarding his training schedule. Then he hopped onto the podium and announced that it was practice time.

Shedding her warm-up suit and falling into step with the others, Monica breathed deeply and summoned her well-rehearsed game state. Immediately, she was focused, all the excitement and anticipation receding, everything flowing along a specific current. She found herself in fluid motion, stretching, jogging, then beginning work on the uneven bars, the balance beam, the vault. Beside each apparatus, Hades and Stacie unleashed their collection of critiques, assessing skill sets, noting weak spots as, in the background, the gym gradually filled with athletes, milling about, running, jumping, twisting, twirling through the air, tumbling across the numerous podiums—feeding the boundless kinetic energy.

The rest of the morning was a flash-frame progression, a rapid-motion composite of missed bar-grabs and unstuck landings, bruised skin, bloody palms, torn ligaments, and frustrated young faces streaked with tears as chalk dust-like-failure rained down from above.

During a brief interlude, Monica, gulping from her water bottle, stood at the edge of the Mexicans' practice space and surveyed the battlefield, watched as a dozen soldier-athletes tore themselves apart at the whim of their commander-coaches. One girl went down hard on the beam, and had to be carried away on a stretcher. A hundred years ago, before the advent of nanomedicine, such an accident would have set her back an entire season, perhaps longer. Now, it was little more than a minor annoyance, one more thing for a coach to lord over his pupil upon her recovery several days later.

Monica was glad she'd kept herself in shape. She endured practice without too much complaint from her muscles, her joints. She was able to warm to the monotony, the tireless repetition of skills performed over and over until they were second nature, with only a scratch here, a bruise there—nothing that warranted a visit to the infirmary.

Throughout, Hades and Stacie were consistent, though Stacie seemed more suited for multi-tasking than Hades. And stern as she was, she didn't have half the temper he did whenever something went wrong. At one point, when Britney bungled one of her layouts, causing her to hop off the beam prematurely, Hades grabbed a handful of chalk from the bowl and hurled it at her, yelling, "Are you *listening* or just hearing? Tilt, *tilt*!" On another occasion, he resorted to childish mimicking when Kristen complained that an aerial skill was proving more difficult than expected.

Consequently, Stacie often had to pull double duty, coddling as well as coaching—and this overwhelmingly resulted in Monica being ignored. She was given instruction, told which skills she was expected to connect in order to assemble her preliminary routines, but beyond that, the hugs, the pep-talk, and the shows of emotional support were reserved for the other girls, who were obviously unstable, emotionally. Or perhaps it was merely their youth that made them prone to throwing fits and sulking whenever something went the slightest bit wrong.

At any rate, Monica was glad when noon break arrived. Her first training session aboard Olympus had stoked tempers, ruffled feathers. There had been no time for smalltalk, no opportunities to sit on the fringes and admire the male

gymnasts.

Indeed, she didn't notice John until she was pulling on her warm-up suit.

"Hello, Monica," he said, his bag slung over his shoulder, his face slightly flushed from his workout. He was smiling, and whether or not it was intentional, he radiated a subtle sort of mischief, a playfulness that seemed to offset the entire morning's harshness.

Monica straightened, cinched the drawstring of her pants. "Hi, John."

"How's it going with Mr. Hades?"

"Well, I'm dealing with his assistant, mostly," said Monica. "But he steps in every now and then to make sure I know everything I'm doing is bad."

John laughed. "So I heard."

"You'd think we were all a bunch of level 6's just trying to get past compulsories." Monica glanced over her shoulder. Hades and Stacie were talking with a small group of press hounds who'd wandered into the gym. A step away, Tompkins and his men kept a meticulous watch.

"He likes to move his girls around a lot, doesn't he?" asked John.

Monica sighed. "You noticed?"

John lowered his eyes, still smiling, looking embarrassed. "I watched you train all morning. My father says you're the Americans' secret weapon, sent here to distract all the other teams' male members. I told him I agree."

Monica reached for her bag. *Boys,* she thought. *Always thinking about romance even when the girl is sweaty and covered in chalk*—though she had to admit she didn't necessarily mind being observed from afar by *this* particular boy.

Lena came to her side.

"Are you ready?" she asked, gesturing at Kristen and Alana, who were waiting at the end of the podium, and who were looking rather impatient. "We'd like our showers—and lunch—before class time starts."

Monica smiled at John. "I should be going."

"Me too," John said. "But maybe we'll bump into each other in the cafeteria?"

"I'll look for you."

He winked and rejoined his teammates.

"Who was that?" Lena asked, folding her arms.

"Some Canadian named John."

Lena studied his physique from behind. After a moment, she said, "Not bad at all."

"Yeah," agreed Monica.

The two of them giggled.

Chapter 17

Somewhere between the showers and the cafeteria, Jackie and Britney were whisked away for safe keeping by Coach Hades. That meant Stacie would be having lunch with Monica, Lena, Kristen, and Alana, and while the prospect wasn't entirely alluring, it was obvious, now that their first training session was over, the girls would rather deal with Stacie than with Hades.

"Jackie wasn't flattering herself," Lena whispered into Monica's ear as they made their way to one of the NAU tables. "Coach Hades really is all about her and Britney. I don't think a moment passes by when they're not under his wing."

"I'm actually thinking it's better this way," Monica whispered back. "Can you imagine eating with Coach Hades? He probably spends two-thirds of the time going over routines."

"It sounds like you don't care much for him."

"Well, he's *Darren Hades*," Monica said, "and it's only my first day working with him, but I have to admit he's a little...intense."

Lena made a face. "It's okay. I don't like him, either."

I didn't say that, Monica thought, but let it drop (what with Stacie in such close proximity) as she took her seat.

"Your orders, please," said Stacie.

"What kind of food do they serve here?" asked Kristen.

"Anything," said Lena. "The kitchens use bulk matter."

"You make it sound *so* good," Monica said, scrunching up her nose.

"Well, they do—it's in the information packet."

"I'll have a turkey sandwich, then. Lettuce and tomato, no oil or mayo, easy on the mustard."

"Hamburger, no onions," added Lena.

After thinking for a moment, Kristen said, "Caesar salad."

Alana quietly nodded and indicated that she wanted what Kristen was having.

Stacie went to fetch the girls their meals. Monica watched her go, her stomach rumbling as she surveyed the cafeteria, which was roped off into sections. Video screens embedded in the walls displayed newsfeeds from a variety of sources. The various countries' respective security officers paced to and fro, up and down the aisles, their firearms clinking as they kept watch over not just the athletes, but the scientists, businessmen, and politicians, too.

The NAU tables were attended by several dozen Patriots from Canada, Mexico, and the United States—most of whom would be discharged after the Pre-Season Assessment meet, replaced, if necessary, as the team rosters were refined here, in

orbit, instead of down on Earth. More teams were on the way, but even now the place was packed, athletes sitting shoulder to shoulder, eating, talking, laughing. Monica couldn't help but notice how much older the non-gymnastics members were. Oh, the other teams had their young prodigies as well, but virtually all the gymnasts present were in their mid to late teens. It was enough to make Monica feel uncommonly self-conscious, she a petite little thing, barely five feet tall, seated beside a towering, muscular Canadian with ample beard stubble dusting his cheeks (a swimmer, she gathered from his conversation with his teammates).

He noticed her right away, offered her a nod and a tentative grin.

"Hi," she said, smiling. "I'm Monica."

The swimmer smirked. "Todd. Let me guess—you're a gymnast, right?"

Monica nodded.

"Yeah, I thought so. It's always the cute little ankle-biters the NPAA likes to put out there front and center, isn't it?"

Todd's companions laughed, not entirely apathetic, but not exactly friendly either—and it dawned on Monica that planetside she'd been a junior; inter-team interaction had been friendly, respectful banter between competitors within the same nation. Here, among the seniors, it was the United States versus the rest of the NAU versus the rest of the world. Economic leverage over prize money.

No false pretenses.

Monica started to turn away—

"Wait, little girl—I mean Monica, is it?"

—and faced the Canadian group again (if only to show that she could take a little criticism without losing her manners). One of the female swimmers was smiling at her.

"You have to forgive him," she said, gesturing at Todd. "He's rather blunt, what with his being a competitor—and a *guy*, no less. It's just...well, obviously everyone at this table is a member of the same union, but our respective countries do have different ideas on things."

"That's okay," Monica said, honestly enough. "No harm, no foul, right?"

"Right. May I ask you a personal question?"

"Go right ahead."

"Is Darren Hades for real?"

A shrug from Monica. "I would think so."

"What I mean is, and please don't take this the wrong way, but, in my opinion, your superiors are crazy to send a group of kids up here. I mean, having minors compete as seniors is one thing, but how can a bunch of middle-schoolers be expected to make it an entire year away from their friends and families?"

Instinctively, Monica looked at Alana, who'd taken to nibbling her bottom lip. It looked like homesickness had been first and foremost on her mind since morning practice. That, combined with her exceedingly dainty physique, and she was just about as vulnerable-looking as you could get.

"We're all in *high school*," Monica clarified, facing the Canadians again. "And we all make our sacrifices. If I can serve my country by spending a year without the

comforts of home, then I'm all for it. But what about you? How are you going to deal with *your* term?"

The Canadian swimmer held up her hands. "No need to be defensive on the matter."

Monica started to respond that it hadn't been her intention to be defensive, that she was only curious, interested in making friends—but it was no use. The older athletes had already turned away, delving into other matters, other conversations.

"What was that about?" Kristen asked.

"I guess," said Monica, "our neighbors have better things to do than talk to a bunch of *little kids*."

The girls waited in silence until Stacie returned with their lunches.

Taking her plate from the tray, Monica noted that there was a conspicuous amount of empty space around her sandwich. "This is kind of small," she said.

Stacie sat herself down and popped the lid off her diet milkshake. "We'll be checking your weight on a daily basis."

"Okay, but this is still the most miniature sandwich I've ever seen. I can have seconds, right?"

"What you have there is what's optimal for your body type."

Monica knew herself. It wasn't as if she'd just entered the sport on a whim. Back at KG, the Keenes had worked with her over the years to develop a competent meal plan. She knew what she could eat, and she knew how much, how often. *Ah, but this isn't KG,* she thought. *This is Olympus, and Gary isn't here. Coach Stacie is.*

Stacie was staring her down, waiting for her to make like her teammates and avail herself of her allotted table scraps.

"Fine," she said. "I'll grab something from the vending machine later." She picked up her sandwich and took a bite. As she ate, she glanced around the cafeteria and scrutinized the dozens, hundreds of faces. *Everyone's eating but us,* she thought, and watched as a pair of women from one of the Spanish teams got up to refill their plates from a nearby kiosk. As they waited for their order to be processed, they joked and laughed with each other, adding to an already boisterous ambiance and making Monica feel even more out-of-place. Her teammates were absolutely wordless—no doubt it was Stacie's presence that put them off. She slurped her vitamins and minerals from her cup and sat straight-backed, watching her girls, supervising. Babysitting.

Monica's sandwich went quick. When she was through, she pushed her plate back and waited quietly for lunchtime to end. It was easy for her gaze to wander, and she was pleasantly surprised when she spotted John, tray in hand, weaving his way through the crowd. When he reached where she was sitting, he bowed gracefully and offered her a roll.

"Compliments of the Canadian Parliament," he said.

"Monica, your diet," warned Stacie.

Monica resisted the urge to accept the roll and devour it right then and there. Instead, maintaining her cool exterior, she shrugged her shoulders and smiled at

John. "That's very thoughtful of you, but I'm supposed to watch what I eat."

"Ah, I see." John bowed to Stacie. "My apologies, madam, for tempting your pupil so."

Stacie nodded ever so slightly; it was obvious she wanted John on his merry way—especially when Lena and Kristen started giggling and rolling their eyes, whispering to one other under their breath.

"The boys' table is over *there*," Stacie said, pointing.

The girls giggled some more as John bowed again and walked away.

Monica watched him go, navigating his way back to the Canadians' table. There, he sat with his teammates, his friends, his coach-and-father, and he talked, he laughed—and Monica knew she could waste her lunchtime no longer. Before Stacie could come up with any excuses, she quickly gathered up Lena, Kristen, and Alana's empty plates and stacked them on the tray.

"I'll bring these to the recycler," she said, and left the table, making good on her word—but instead of returning to the United States' table, she went to John's, tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hi," she said as he looked up.

He grinned. "Did the mother bear let you out of the den?"

Monica glanced over her shoulder and caught a feral stare from Stacie. "You could say that."

"Will you sit with us, then?"

"Yes."

The other boys and men welcomed her graciously, making room for her to sit, asking her name, and then introducing themselves. Even John's father (and namesake), who'd earlier exuded an air of nonstop focus, was looking amiable.

"So, what's your story?" John asked her after the pleasantries were out of the way.

"I'm part of the U.S. Patriots' bold new plan," Monica replied. "My coach gave a speech about it this morning—something about determination and perseverance, though I couldn't understand half of what he said. He's a little artsy that way."

John nodded knowingly. "So's my father. Always chattering about goals and having a grand vision for your team, your club, your country—but as soon as you make the slightest mistake, he's about as eloquent as an elephant on a unicycle."

Several seats down, John's father snorted and said, "It's a constant struggle between my alleged ineloquence and my son's spastic attention span."

Monica giggled. "Is that true?"

"Certainly not!" John exclaimed. "I've got enough of an attention span to have competed at several international competitions, where I've won a number of medals and certificates. Of course, this is my first shot at becoming a Hero."

"Same here, except this season it will be my first time competing internationally—ever."

"Wow," said Dean, the lanky gymnast sitting across from John and Monica. "That's unusual, isn't it?"

"Yeah," replied Monica, "but I guess since everyone thinks this will be the

United States' last term aboard Olympus, our athletic coordinators are betting a shakedown is just what our program needs. Whether or not it works, though..."

John said, "You must feel a lot of pressure from your countryfolk."

"I don't think it's really sunk in all the way yet. You know, being here and on the team. I imagine that will change once the season begins and we start competing in front of an audience. I'm more worried about adjusting to my new coaches at the moment."

"If it's any help, you looked great during practice."

Monica folded her arms. "Shouldn't you have been focusing on your *own* routines?"

Dean cooed; another of the boys wrapped his arm around John's neck and ran his knuckles against his scalp.

"It's true what Coach Matusik says," Dean chuckled. "John's always letting his attention wander—that's why his scores can always be tallied on one hand."

During a half-hearted attempt to wriggle free, John said, "Can I help it if I'm a sucker for pretty American girls?"

Monica felt herself blush. She liked the idea that he thought she looked "pretty." It wasn't at all like when Pat hit on her with his desperate, blatant pickup lines disguised as careless humor—vain attempts to acquire a suitable mate before the supposed apocalypse. John seemed fun. Certainly he was hitting on her (something all boys did whenever they acted that certain way around girls), but she didn't mind. It made her feel deliciously appreciated.

After a moment, John's father clapped his hands and ordained order.

John's teammate let him go. He re-situated his collar and asked Monica, "Are you free on Sunday?"

"Yeah," replied Monica, recalling Stacie's having mentioned that Sundays were recuperation days for athletes—no training allowed. "I can't wait to visit the promenade belt. It's a bit claustrophobic here without windows, if you ask me."

"Windows are always nice." John glanced around the cafeteria. "Nicer than all these silly video screens. A view of Earth would be sublime."

"The station's rotation would make you dizzy," Monica said.

"You know what's making me dizzy right now?"

Monica shook her head. "What?"

"The way your coach is trying to burn a hole through your head from across the room."

Monica turned and looked at the U.S. table. Sure enough, Stacie was giving her The Eye. Lena, Kristen, and Alana sat with heads bowed, shoulders slumped.

"I'd better get back," Monica said, standing.

John stood, too. "Yes, you'd better."

"I enjoyed watching your wrestling skills."

"Always a pleasure." John massaged the back of his neck. "See you on Sunday?"

"Sounds good."

"Sunday, then. Goodbye, Monica."

"Bye, John."

Back at her own table, Monica sat down and smiled smugly.

Stacie cleared her throat. "Monica."

"Yes?"

"Look at me."

Monica looked at her.

"I don't like you fraternizing with the enemy."

"They're just being friendly."

"Perhaps," said Stacie, "but don't forget: they're taking jobs from our workers, products from our store shelves, food from our children's mouths."

"That's competition stuff—in the gym. Or aren't we allowed to be regular people during our lunch break?"

The other girls' eyes darted to and fro between Monica and Stacie.

Stacie leaned forward. "Monica, dear, this isn't little old Waukesha County anymore, and you're not here just to earn a few extra ameros for your club. You're a Patriot now—act like one. I don't want you wandering off like that again. Do you understand?"

Monica frowned. "Yes, Coach Stacie."

"Now," said Stacie, "all of us are to sit quietly and wait for lunch to be over. Are we clear?"

The girls nodded.

Monica's stomach grumbled.

She wished she'd eaten John's roll.

Chapter 18

On Earth, classes at Hamilton had been a necessary evil. On Olympus, school time offered a welcome (and Stacie-free!) reprieve, as Mr. McDonald, the instructor, was just about the only person in uniform who wasn't on the clock, uptight, or generally stressed-out—though this might have had something to do with the fact that his classroom was mostly empty, save for Monica and her teammates. (Normally the women's Patriot team had twenty to thirty athletes on its roster going into a new season, but as recent events had shown, Monica's team was anything but normal.)

"I like a small group," McDonald said once he'd taken roll and gotten the girls to arrange their chairs in a circle near the head of the room. "You get a good give and take this way."

For the majority of their class time, he had the team work through a collection of general worksheets, covering mathematics, English, and science. The last twenty minutes were devoted to current events, and began with a question:

"Why did that group of extremists stage the Alabama Massacre?"

"Because they're *crazy*," said Kristen, raising her hand.

Lena chuckled softly.

"But they were Mexican," said McDonald. "They were our neighbors, part of the North American Union. Why would they turn on their own?"

"Lots of people hurt each other," said Lena. "It doesn't matter if they're NAU members or not."

McDonald considered. "Then terrorists—or in this case political extremists—do what they do simply to do it?"

Monica raised her hand. "Terrorists act on behalf of their benefactors. The people who employed the radicals behind the Massacre don't consider the NAU as 'their own.' They see the Global Ranking System as a U.S.-instigated movement dictating to the United Nations who gets what. They cling to outdated values and traditions, most of which serve the self instead of the whole. So, naturally, they feel it's futile to attempt to find a solution to their problems via council talks. They use their own drastic measures to dictate terms to the government via the media."

"Said terms being...?"

"Forcing others to concede to their wishes through the use of violence."

McDonald nodded. "That's an interesting perspective. How did you come up with it?"

Monica shrugged and said, "There was a political commentary piece on the news."

"Do you think it was accurate?"

"I think people can disagree, and they can sometimes show their dissatisfaction in a violent or unorthodox way. An 'act now, think later' kind of thing."

"Maybe they're just trying to feed their families," said Alana.

"Go on," McDonald said.

Alana swallowed as everyone looked at her. "Well, the NAU has only been around for a few decades. Many sectors are still adjusting to the repercussions. I mean, it's basically large-scale tribalism, getting the protection of, say, a unified military, or a one-size-fits-all monetary system, at the expense of a certain amount of autonomy. Mexico has long been a source of labor, but when our Patriots consistently failed to get our grants renewed, we were forced to turn over more and more of what we produced—using Mexican factories and laborers—to competing nations. We produce for other countries, and NAU workers are tired of it. They want the ability to enjoy the fruits of their labor."

McDonald nodded. "It's all about leverage, isn't it? Dominance. The human leveraging paradigm dictates that, regardless of age, race, or social status, humans have a baseline instinct to leverage themselves over others. In previous times, we exercised leverage through out and out warfare. Now, industrialized nations agree not to bomb each other unless it's within the context of the GRS. Military force is still necessary, but only in situations where people don't play fair. The lot of you being competitive athletes, you should understand the concept of leverage. You agree to abide by, say, the Code of Points in exchange for a chance at a cash prize, a certificate, a medal."

"Only now it's the GRS," said Lena. "Countries playing by certain rules to earn goods and services in return."

"But not all countries agree with the GRS," said Alana. "The problem is that each nation has its own definition of what's fair."

"That's true," said McDonald. "Do you think Heroes' Day is fair?"

Alana looked flustered. "Well, I...of course I do. I was just trying to show the other side of the coin."

"Do you think it's fair that the United States controls Olympus?"

Lena raised her hand. "Somebody has to. Why not us? We built it."

"How about you, Monica?" McDonald asked. "Do you think the Global Ranking System is an even-handed method of allocating resources?"

"I think it's fair to allocate according to rank, yes."

"Is it fair that rank sometimes supersedes need, say in those nations with large portions of the populace living below the poverty line? Where Patriot eligibility is spotty at best?"

"Well, yes."

"Even though it's sometimes necessary to use military force?"

Monica squirmed somewhat. "It's better to use military force to ensure people make good on their promises rather than using military force to dictate those promises in the first place."

"Go on."

"Um..." Monica trailed off, grasping at mental straws. She found Gary Keene's office lecture coming back to her. "We restrict the fighting, the competing, to the sports arenas. The scores are turned over to the lawmakers. Then the lawmakers get together and go over who and what goes where, with the military acting as support. Back in the old days, all the fighting was done in trenches, out in the field. Today it's...it's more civilized."

McDonald leaned back in his chair, smiled strangely as he stared off into space. "Civilized war, eh?"

Monica and her teammates looked at each other, a silent poll being held as to who should be the one to ask for clarification. It didn't matter, though, because just as Lena was raising her hand, the end-of-session bell rang.

Time to get back to the training room.

* * *

The girls were back in the gym by 15:00. Afternoon practice was much the same as morning practice, with Hades and Stacie barking and yelling, continuing their tyrannical assessment of the girls' skills. Monica's routines were doubly hard because she knew Stacie was keeping an eye on her, looking for the tendency toward insubordination she'd shown in the cafeteria. As such, she took extra care to make sure she performed above and beyond expectation, and this meant pushing herself, ignoring cramps, aches, suppressing mental blocks.

When quitting time came, she was thoroughly exhausted. Wordlessly, she shuffled along behind her teammates as she waited at the edge of the podium to have her various scrapes and sprains tended to (Jackie and Britney were, not surprisingly, swept away by Hades to have their showers and recuperation time elsewhere). Stacie didn't say much as she worked the girls over with her med kit, deftly discerning between genuine injury and necessary microtrauma. At one point, when Alana started sobbing during a tendon repair, Monica watched in disbelief as Stacie took her in her arms, smoothed her hair.

"It's okay. It's almost over," she whispered. "You're doing well."

Amazed, amused, Monica thought to herself, *So, Coach Stacie, despite the robot exterior, you* are *capable of acting like a human being from time to time.*

She exchanged knowing glances with Lena—then the moment was past, Alana's injuries repaired, Stacie straightening, sobering, nodding for the next girl in line.

* * *

Back in their home stripe, the girls showered, had dinner, then retired to their quarters. Monica tossed her uniform and workout gear into the clothing sanitizer, then lay on her bunk. She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of her roommates' winding down for the night as the day's events flitted through her mind. Eventually, someone turned off the lights, and all was quiet, save for the

muffled hum of the station's air filtration system, the sound of sheets rustling, settling, breath slowing, someone's sniffling—

—Alana's muffled sobbing.

Moving quietly, Monica got out of bed, grasped the frame of Alana's bunk and hoisted herself up. She shook Alana's shoulder. "You okay?" At first, Alana tried to make like she'd just come awake—but Monica knew better. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," replied Alana, hiccuping inadvertently. "I was fine last night."

"That was last night."

Alana sat up somewhat and rubbed her eyes. Her tear-stained cheeks glistened in the glow of the night light. "You know how you sort of think random thoughts as you fall asleep?"

"I'm always practicing tumbling passes in my head."

"Me too!" Alana smiled, then quickly frowned again. "Tonight I was thinking of Mr. McDonald's class and how we had that political discussion."

"Oh, yeah. The little round table thingie. You sure made an impression."

"You really think so?"

"Sure. You sounded smart."

A laugh escaped Alana's lips. "Maybe to you, but to Mr. McDonald...I think he was trying to get to know us more than he was trying to teach those last twenty minutes."

"Naturally."

"No, I mean, like, he was feeling us up."

"*Feeling us up?*"

"No!" Alana hissed, and giggled again. "I don't mean it that way. I mean..." She bit her lip, thinking for a moment. "He wanted to see how patriotic we were. A test, maybe, for new recruits—I must have sounded like a hypocrite."

"You did not," Monica said. "You were looking at the big picture, playing devil's advocate, but you're still an American. He knows who you're loyal to."

Alana looked like she was struggling to maintain her smile. "It didn't help that Coach Hades called me a 'sabotage artist.'"

It was true: During afternoon practice, Monica (and everyone else within earshot) had heard the ruckus as Hades had blatantly exploited one of Alana's mistakes by insinuating her desire to intentionally bring down her team's average.

"That was rough," Monica whispered.

"He's not like I expected," Alana said. "He's...he's *mean*."

Tell me about it, Monica thought. She'd had her own epiphanies upon first meeting her shiny new coach. The idea of training under Darren Hades had been a novelty, but realistically, he was ill-suited for coaching. Volatile. Inexperienced, perhaps—just what the NPAA wanted in their bid to stir things up. A loose cannon directing a team full of untried Patriots. "Some coaches are tough, strict, but that's okay, because they're just trying to motivate you to be the best you can be."

Alana started crying again.

Monica sighed, slipped beside her and cuddled her in her arms. "It's your first

day—it's his first day, too. A new team, new rules. And it's not like your coach back home never yelled at you on a bad day, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"It'll get better."

Alana wiped her face, looked at Monica. "You're lucky. He never yells at you."

"Coach Stacie yells at me," Monica said, thinking about it for a moment, unable to recall a single instance where Hades had raised his voice to her. "She didn't like the way I answered the reporters' questions at yesterday's press conference. As for Coach Hades...to be honest, Alana, I don't think he cares enough about me to waste his voice. He hardly paid any attention to me today."

"You're probably better off that way."

"If you say so."

"Really," said Alana. "I've been thinking about it. I mean, all the press releases say how Hades was put in charge of the team because of his performance during Heroes' Day, but wouldn't it have made more sense to have put his trainers in charge? After all, aren't *they* the ones who designed his winning routines?"

Good point, Monica thought, though at the moment she was too tired to think much about it. "Who knows why the higher-ups do what they do? It's just different being a Patriot. Everyone's probably got a lot on their minds—the NPAA probably yells at our coaches as much as our coaches yell at us."

"I'd love to see Coach Hades getting chewed out."

"Maybe it will happen if we're patient," Monica said, and left Alana's bunk.

On the way down, Alana caught her by the wrist, whispered, "Thanks, Monica. I'm glad you're our team captain. Our Big Sister."

"Glad I could be of assistance."

Monica returned to her bunk and pulled the blanket up to her chin—and was surprised to find herself shivering, considering: *Is that what I really am here? A Big Sister?* She wondered what it would have been like for Alana had she not made the team, had she not been there to provide a shoulder to cry on—she hoped she'd handled the situation properly, both now and throughout her first day training as a Patriot, escaping injury, dodging Hades' eagle eye, and stoking Stacie's temper at every turn.

In a few short hours, she would wake up to begin the cycle all over again.

Chapter 19

Stacie hadn't been kidding about the weight thing. Every morning before practice, she had the girls step onto the scale, and if anyone deviated by so much as an ounce, she launched into an impromptu speech concerning the evils of uncontrollable midnight-snacking. Now, Monica was certainly aware that coaches trained movements, sculpted bodies, and developed meal plans as part of their trade, but coming from Hades and Stacie, a weight-watching regime was nothing short of draconian.

Case in point: On Friday morning, Hades, frowning as he always did whenever he spotted Monica's numbers, took her aside and said, "We've got to talk about your weight."

Monica supposed she should be flattered; Hades was actually *talking* to her.

She said, "I've been at one-hundred since October."

"That's five pounds over the baseline."

"You mean my stomach sticks out too much during a lineup?" Monica relaxed her abdomen, which remained quite flat despite her effort to create a pooch.

Hades wasn't amused. "Don't get smart."

Monica tightened up again. "I'm also taller than the others. Should we saw off the unnecessary portions of my legs to even things out?"

"Monica, this isn't the time for silliness."

Monica looked away, watched the girls doing their jumping jacks. "We're wasting warm-up time, sir."

Hades waited.

"My stats were readily available through the Keene's Gymnastics office before I was drafted. If you didn't like my numbers, it would have been better not to have drafted me at all rather than force me to lose five pounds and have to adjust my routines to accommodate the new weight."

"Irrelevant," said Hades. "You *have* been drafted, you *have* been made a member of the Patriot team, and you *will* follow my dietary guidelines. You will also refrain from misguiding your roommates' eating decisions by telling them to eat whatever and whenever."

Monica felt the back of her throat tighten. She'd been busted, she realized, and thought of last night's dinner, how she'd called up portions for Lena, Kristen, Alana, and herself that had been substantially larger than what Hades normally allowed. At first the girls had resisted temptation, but Monica, as team captain, had insisted they eat right regardless of whether or not they were breaking the rules.

One of them is a tattler, she thought. *Or else Hades really is counting the ounces.*

Even now, his critical eye seemed to be scrutinizing her waist, her thighs. He didn't dare say anything further on the matter, however, because Linda had suddenly exploded onto the podium, and was calling out to the U.S. team, blowing each member a kiss. She stopped beside Monica and Hades.

"How are things going, hon?" she asked, putting her arm around Monica's shoulders and squeezing.

Looking down at her feet, Monica said, "I should go warm up."

Hades nodded, quickly shifting demeanors. "We'll talk more later," he said, and gestured for her to join Stacie and the others.

As she jogged over to where her teammates were, she heard Hades and Linda chatting amiably. *That's not how he was a minute ago,* she thought.

(Across the way, John, whose team had just arrived, offered a wave and a smile. It did little to uplift Monica's spirits.)

During heel rolls, Jackie made it her business to be nosy:

"You're a firecracker, aren't you?"

Really, she wasn't. There was no reason for the automatic apathy between herself and Hades other than the fact that something in his manner brought out the worst in her. "I stand up for myself."

"But you're on a team now, Monica."

"I was on a team back home."

Jackie snorted. "Your club doesn't count. I mean, that's a *junior* team. The rules are much more relaxed."

"Rules or not, Coach Hades needs to back off," Monica said. "Does he gibe you and Britney over your weight, too?"

"Darren is set in his ways," Jackie said. "A coach needs to be. Standards have to be high at this level." She paused a moment, directing a critical glance at Monica's butt. "You *could* stand to lose a little padding."

Aesthetic advice from a fifteen-year-old—Monica didn't know if she should come up with a clever retort or simply laugh out loud at Jackie's infantile attempt at playing guidance counselor. Worse, she felt ashamed at wanting to react in such an either-or fashion. She'd trained with younger girls back in Waukesha County, some of whom had been downright bratty when they'd wanted to be. Jackie merely spoke her mind as soon as the thoughts were formed. *Why, then, does she tick me the heck off?* Monica wondered. *Is it because Coach Hades never yells at her when she makes a mistake? Is it because I'm jealous? Is it my new surroundings? Or have I merely been hard-wired as a junior elite, unable to compromise as a senior?*

But no, that was ridiculous. That couldn't be it. Monica knew herself to be a goal-minded individual. Her work ethic—her *life*—was built upon a series of progressions, improvements, the mantra that she could always do better. She *wanted* to be aboard Olympus. Despite Stacie's flipping out during the press release, the lack of warmth in her persona, Hades' unhealthy obsession with weight, as well as his general inability to control his temper, Monica *wanted* to compete for her country. She knew she had it in her to rise to the occasion, to make the uncomfortable bits here as worthwhile as her time back on Earth—to prove to

herself and everyone else that she hadn't been recruited on a whim.

"Monica!" Stacie barked, clapping her hands. "Head out of the clouds! I want your release skills solid today!"

Monica nodded, finished her last roll before heading over to the uneven bars. *Prove yourself,* she thought. *They can push your buttons, but it's up to you how to react.*

Chapter 20

Monica woke Sunday morning at her own discretion. She quietly grabbed her towel and a change of clothes, and was halfway to the door when Lena called out to her from her bunk:

"Where are you going?"

"For a shower."

Lena threw the blanket aside and rubbed her eyes. "Wait, we'll go with you."

Monica waited, slightly annoyed as Lena shook Kristen and Alana awake. She hadn't planned on making an outing of her trip to the bathroom—but then she reminded herself: this wasn't practice, she wasn't in the gym, and it wasn't Jackie or Britney she was having to deal with. So it would be okay. Mostly.

The showers were already crowded (it seemed everyone in the stripe had had the similar idea of beating everyone else to the mark), but the wait wasn't too bad, and afterward, Monica and her group were able, thanks to their small statures, to squeeze in front of the mirror without much trouble. (Yes, Stacie had instructed them to use the mirror in their room, but as they'd spent the last week oscillating back and forth between their quarters and the gym, the opportunity to spend time elsewhere was not to be missed—even if it was just the bathroom.)

"Isn't it wonderful having a day without Coach Stacie?" asked Kristen, brushing her hair.

"Ugh!" Lena groaned. "Can you imagine her showering with us?"

Monica distorted her face as she tweezed a rogue hair from her left eyebrow. "No, and I'll thank you not to put that image in my head."

Kristen rested her hands on her hips, put on a stern, Stacie-like expression. "She'd be like, 'That's not how you wet your hair! Too much shampoo! Not *enough* shampoo! Now...rinse, girls! Hustle, hustle, hustle!'"

Monica laughed. Kristen's impersonation was good. It was enough to allay all worries that her morning might turn into a babysitting gig. Her teammates were younger than she was, but they weren't immature, and being with them rekindled the excitement of being aboard Olympus.

"Should we check out the lounge?" Lena asked once everyone had finished their various grooming tasks.

"I say we get breakfast," suggested Kristen.

"I should call my parents first," said Alana. "I promised them I'd keep in touch."

Kristen went bug-eyed. "Oh, yeah! I totally forgot!"

"Yeah," said Monica, "me too."

Gathering their things, they returned to their room. The girls had their phones with them, of course, but calls and texts were restricted aboard Olympus. Intra-station phone use was allowed; all planetside communication had to be done via computer terminal. Alana sat at the desk and turned on the computer, which promptly displayed a login screen asking for user name and password.

"Um, does anyone have their account information handy?" she asked, frowning.

Kristen threw her arms up in the air. "I'm a gymnast, not a computer specialist!"

"I thought our ID tags had our account information stored in them," said Lena.

"Guess not."

"Wait," Monica said, going over to her cubby. "I remember a user-account something-or-other being in the Olympus paperwork." It took her a moment's browsing on her laptop, but sure enough she found the page with her user name and password. Alana let her sit at the computer; she entered her information and was presented with a plain desktop.

The girls cheered.

Olympus' system setup was different from what Monica was accustomed to, but she eventually found the messaging software. However, as soon as she clicked "Connect," a dialog box popped up: RESOURCE UNAVAILABLE.

"Ugh, computers," sighed Lena.

"So, what?" asked Kristen. "Is the system down or something?"

Alana leaned over Monica's shoulder. "Did you type the right password?"

"Yeah," Monica replied. "Does anyone know what the '401' means?"

"It's a network response code," said Alana. "It has to do with authorization, I think."

"Meaning I'm not authorized to use the messenger?"

"Either you or the system, but yeah."

Monica tried again, grimaced when a similar result manifested itself. *It's my day off and here I am whittling away the morning with network response codes!* The Web browser seemed to work, though. "I guess I'll have to do this the old-fashioned way," she said, and logged into her e-mail account.

She started a new message:

Subject: Hi Mom
From: "Monica Sardinia" <msardinia@trinet.com>
Date: Sun, 8 Nov 2099
To: "Sharon Sardinia" <sharon4326@foresight.net>

Hi, mom. I tried calling you just now, but the computer in my room isn't working right. I'm fine. It's been very busy here on Olympus. I'm getting a handle on things, though. My new teammates are friendly. They're hard workers, and are very supportive. Anyway, today's my day off. I hope to visit the

promenade—I'll definitely take pictures! Tell Chris I'm working on my flares. I love you guys. Talk to you soon.

After sending her message, Monica relinquished the chair to Alana, letting her give the video messenger a go—without success. Lena and Kristen, too, tried logging in under their own accounts, but in both instances the result was the same: no video messaging allowed.

"He doesn't trust us," Monica murmured, standing with her arms folded.

"Who?" asked Kristen, still sitting at the desk and repeatedly clicking the "Connect" button.

"Coach Hades—or maybe it was Coach Stacie's idea."

"Well," said Lena, "it could be that they simply forgot to activate our accounts."

Monica shook her head. "I bet Jackie and Britney are sitting around in their underwear this very moment and eating popcorn while they blab to their friends about this and that over a crisp and clear, high definition video call."

"You don't like them, do you?" asked Kristen, hesitant.

"I don't even know them—none of us knows them! And that's the problem."

Lena and Kristen looked at each other; Alana fixed her gaze on the floor.

"Oh, lighten up," Monica said, shrugging, banishing her temper with a smile. "I'll file a complaint later. Let's go to the promenade."

Lena grinned cautiously. "What about Coach Stacie?"

"What about her?"

"What if she doesn't want to go?"

"Then she doesn't want to go. But as team captain, I'm insisting on a little R&R so that we'll be refreshed come tomorrow morning. Besides, as lieutenant officers, we have clearance."

Again, hesitation on the girls' part. But Monica didn't wait for a unanimous decision. She slipped out of her sweatpants and T-shirt and into a blue summer dress, sandals. Then, grabbing her purse, she stood by the door, waiting, tapping her foot on the floor. "Well, ladies?" she asked. "Are you with me?"

It took a moment, but the girls finally acquiesced (even if only to ensure they weren't hanging around when Stacie came asking questions). Changed into shorts, dresses, skirts, sandals, slippers, sneakers, and augmented by earrings, tastefully-applied lipstick, the group headed *en masse* out of their quarters and down the corridor.

"Wow, look at the four of you," Tompkins said, smiling when they reached his post at the end of the stripe. "What's got you all spiffed up?"

"We're going to the promenade," said Monica.

Tompkins frowned. "Sorry, ladies, but you need to be accompanied by an adult in order to leave the stripe."

"You're an adult," said Lena, stepping up to Tompkins. "Can't you take us?"

Tompkins shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

The girls hung their heads.

"But it's our day off!" Monica exclaimed.

"Yeah!" added Kristen. "We're tired of being cooped up with no windows, no sunlight!"

Monica motioned for her friends to form a half-circle around Tompkins. Together they whined as cutely as possible:

"Oh, *please*, Mr. Tompkins, can't you make an exception?"

"I'll buy you a soda!"

"You can show us the arena!"

"You look like you could use some fresh air!"

Tompkins chuckled and held up his hands in mock-defense. "I'm honored that you would have me along, but without permission from your coaches or from Ms. Baimbridge, it would be quite inappropriate."

Monica's heart sank. With smiles capsized, with purses and handbags dragging at their sides, she and the girls retreated several paces back into the stripe. As they stood deciding what to do, a pair of older athletes swished past, waving their hands over Tompkins' reader and chuckling amiably as they continued onward to the nearest lift—no coaches, no legal guardians required.

"Looks like we're going to have to get permission from Coach Stacie," said Lena.

"Or Coach Hades," said Kristen.

"I'm not asking him."

"I didn't say that. I was just—"

Monica held up her hand. "*I'll* ask Coach Stacie..." she said, trailing off as it occurred to her she didn't know which room was hers. "Um, does anyone know where she's staying?"

Lena shrugged; Kristen and Alana looked questioningly at each other.

"For heaven's sake, we don't even know which rooms our coaches are in?"

"It never came up," said Alana.

"I *told* you they don't trust us," said Monica. "To and from the gym, and maybe a few minutes in the cafeteria or shower—that's all they expect of us."

"I'm sure it's only due to security concerns," Lena said.

"Yeah right. Do you remember how long it took just to get past the station's hub? What's the point of having all that security if we're just going to be restricted to our home stripe?"

"You seem upset, Monica."

"And you're not? I mean, come on! Back home, didn't you ever get stuck in some crappy motel the night before a competition, all the girls crammed into one room, the coaches in the other, sweaty, cramped, everyone sitting around trying to get the TV working while you swap stories about the vending machines ignoring your tag, your friends coming out of the shower all blue because they couldn't get the hot water working—even then you have the assurance of knowing you're all going through it together. Here, I don't feel like we're part of the team. It's like we're visitors, tourists, cut off, isolated."

"We're minors," Alana said, simply. "It would be different if we were adults."

"We may be underage, but that doesn't mean we have to be prisoners. Do they really expect us to spend every one of our Sundays puttering about our home stripe? And for a whole year?"

Lena shook her head, scowling. "Geez, Monica, you're all about doom and gloom, aren't you?"

"I am *not*," Monica replied, though she was well aware her darker side wasn't entirely subdued at the moment. "I'm trying to be practical."

Down the corridor, Tompkins was pacing, keeping an eye on them. He looked genuinely sympathetic, really, he did, but he was only a security guard. Hades and Stacie were the girls' legal guardians, and it was up to them who went where and when.

Monica straightened, put on a smile. "Wait here," she told the others, and strode up to Tompkins.

"Have you gals decided what to do with yourselves after all?" he asked, not unkindly.

Nodding, Monica said, "Yes, but it's probably going to take some negotiating with our coaches."

Tompkins nodded.

"Can you tell me which rooms they're staying in?"

"Why, sure." Tompkins pointed down the corridor. "Rooms 21 and 25, Lieutenants Hades and Stacie, respectively."

"Thank you, Mr. Tompkins."

Monica went to Stacie's door, where, with the girls waiting nervously behind her, she waved her hand over the buzzer. Waited. No answer. She was about to try again when the unmistakable phenomenon of Linda Baimbridge—gyrating down the corridor, snapping pictures of Monica's group with her camera, swooning between shutter clicks—caught her attention.

"Oh, look at you!" Linda cried gleefully once she was within pinching range. "Little women! Darling sprites! I'm just going to *die* you're so utterly cute!" *Pinch-pinch, snap-snap.* "I could go through an entire memory card right here and now—but come, *come*! It would be criminal for me not to share you with the others!"

She started in the direction of Tompkins' checkpoint.

Monica and the girls fell into step behind her.

"Where are we going?" asked Alana.

"Why, the promenade, of course!" Linda answered.

Chapter 21

Linda's commandeering of the morning was both a blessing and a curse. Yes, she'd gotten the girls away from their home stripe, and yes, she was taking them to the promenade belt for the day—but R&R, unfortunately, had nothing to do with it.

"*Flipz Magazine*," she explained during the ride, "has sent a camera crew up to do an interview and photo shoot for their January issue! Oh, isn't this exciting?"

Lena and Kristen (and Alana, to a lesser extent) nodded and smiled and agreed that there was nothing more exciting than an opportunity to grace the pages of *Flipz*. Monica gushed similarly, enthusiastic enough, but more than a little disappointed at not being able to bum around the promenade in a more leisurely fashion. She was still fuming over the level of mistrust Hades had shown her and the girls.

In due time, the transport stopped in front of a business lot flanked by jacaranda and sycamore. Linda led the way inside one of three single-story buildings—"The Behler Agency," judging from the nameplate on the door.

Jackie and Britney were already gussied up and waiting in the lobby. Linda had the girls sit together so that she could take more photos.

Click. "Beautiful, Britney! Lena! Those big blue eyes! Oh, Monica, what a magnificent smile!" Click-click. When she was finished (or perhaps her camera had run out of memory), she said, "The makeup artist will be over shortly, dearies!" and drifted off into the next room.

Monica turned to Jackie and Britney and asked, "I didn't know we had a photo thingie scheduled for today, did you?"

Britney said, "It was supposed to be a piece on Jackie and me, seeing as how we trained together at Sunburst, but Linda thought it would look good to have us all together as a team."

"Yeah," said Jackie. "She says any good Patriot elite works as much on public relations as she does on pirouettes."

How cute, thought Monica.

After a few minutes, Hades, looking quite laid-back, breezed into the lobby. He was followed by a *Flipz* staff reporter and the makeup lady.

"Ah, our ringers have arrived," Hades said, reaching down and ruffling Lena's hair. "Allow me to introduce Lena Trotter, Kristen O'Brien, Alana Chang, and—" He lunged forward; with incredible strength and grace, he grabbed Monica around the waist, hoisted her up onto his shoulder. "—Monica Sardinia, our team captain."

Hades' move had been totally unexpected. Luckily, though, Monica's reflexes

kicked in and kept her from tumbling onto the floor, kept her legs tucked appropriately together, her toes curled so that she wouldn't lose her flip-flops. In spite of herself, she was impressed by Hades' form.

The reporter smiled and nodded, shook hands with her. "Team captain, eh? Well, why don't we start with you, then?"

Monica smiled when she noticed the look of betrayal on Jackie's face. "Okay." As they passed into the next room, Monica still perched on Hades' shoulder and ducking to avoid the door frame: "*Ringers*?"

Hades chuckled. "Relax. I was just pressing your buttons." He winked at the reporter. "She has a thing going with me. I give her a hard time, she gives me a hard time—but you'll often find stubbornness is the mark of any good elite."

The shooting area had been set up with lights, reflectors, and a half-sized balance beam. Hades set Monica down beside the beam so that she could be tended to by the makeup artist, whose name was Holly.

"I love your hair," Holly said as she started dabbing away.

"Thanks," said Monica.

"Have you ever done this before?"

"Sort of."

"Well, get used to it. Once the new season starts, you'll be spending about as much time posing in front of the camera as you do training in the gym."

Once Holly had moved on to do Hades' makeup, the *Flipz* reporter came over and went over a list of questions, asked if there was anything Monica or Hades wanted to talk about during their interviews. Hades chatted freely as Holly worked on him. He was cheerful, charismatic, offering up insights, jokes, and heart-to-hearts—setting an example for his girls to emulate.

The interview got underway, Monica sitting on the beam at the reporter's request and answering questions as the cameramen circled her with their restless lenses. When she was through, she stood off to the side with Linda, promised to be quiet as she watched the others do their interviews. Jackie, Britney, and Lena seemed to warm easily to the camera crews, but Alana (not surprisingly) and Kristen spent most of the time blushing and apologizing.

"That was *so* weird," Kristen said as soon as she'd found her way over to where Monica was standing. "I didn't think I'd make it through that part about my grandmother."

Alana, who'd gone before her, said, "They get personal, don't they?"

"This was tame," offered Jackie. "One guy—he was from *The Elite Reader*, I think—wanted to talk about underwear, leotards, and bikini lines. I was like, 'No, thanks, perv!'"

Monica caught herself laughing. "Did you really say that?"

"You bet!"

Lena came jogging up.

"Gawd," she said, doing a twirl. "We all look like movie stars! They never treated us this nicely at any ol' junior conference. Isn't this wicked?"

"Yeah," said Monica, agreeable enough, but unsure whether or not she liked all

the glamor. Gymnastics was supposed to be about training and competition, not sitting around talking about hobbies and favorites.

"You know," said Kristen, "I can't believe I didn't notice until now."

"Notice what?" asked Monica.

"Stacie's not here."

Britney said, "I overheard Darren telling the reporter that it was her day off."

Monica snorted. "It's *our* day off, too."

"Oh, this isn't so bad." Lena did another turn. "Don't you feel like a Patriot now?"

Monica shrugged. "I guess it beats having to do conditioning all afternoon."

Lena frowned, stuck her tongue out before turning to Jackie and Britney and taking on more lively topics. Eventually Kristen joined in, leaving Alana to her quiet fidgeting, Monica to her introspection. Off to the side, Linda chattered on her phone. Over by the balance beam, Hades' photo shoot had turned into an impromptu striptease, with him taking off his shirt and posing for the cameras. His chiseled musculature earned him more than a few woos from the women.

"Ooh-la-la, Darren!" squealed Linda, momentarily covering her phone with her hand. "Give us the real you!"

Monica clapped along with everyone else. There was a sour spot in her stomach. *You want the* real *Darren Hades? Come back tomorrow morning when he brings out the weight scale. Come back when he's telling us we're lazy underachievers hitching a free ride on taxpayer earnings. Come back when he's telling us what he* really *thinks and not just what's fit for video.*

Hades' shoot seemed to go on forever. When it was finally over, when Monica thought that at last she would be released from her Patriot responsibilities for the afternoon, the photographers decided to get some "action" shots of Team USA to go along with the studio shots—and so the girls were transplanted back to their home stripe, rushed into their training gear. Then it was off to the gym, onto the beam, around the bars, over the vault, across the floor, and though the work was no more taxing than that of a normal training session, Monica found herself bored silly during the camera crew's numerous blocking and lighting adjustments.

Throughout, Hades was an ever-present entity, the impeccable coach, the endlessly patient mentor, hugging and kissing his girls as if they were his daughters, his flesh and blood. The others played along, no doubt taking advantage of a rare opportunity, but Monica kept her distance, and at the earliest opportunity she sneaked off by herself to practice layouts while her teammates swarmed around the camera crew and asked questions.

After a while, Hades came over, stood with his hands on his hips.

"Monica, what's the matter?" he asked.

She looked at him, acknowledging his presence before performing another layout. When she landed, and was lining up for another, she said, "Nothing's the matter. I just don't like all the bright lights and bold questions. We could be putting our time to better use."

"Seems to me," said Hades, "that you don't like me much, either."

Monica tumbled again, landed with the slightest of wobbles. She turned and faced Hades. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I could tell by your body language during the photo shoot. A flex, a flinch, a curling of your toes or fingers at the mere mention of my name... I bet you three-quarters of the shots on the photographers' cameras are useless."

"Why, because my smile wasn't dead-on all the time?"

"Because you acted like you'd rather be anywhere else than with your team."

"I wasn't aware my mood was so apparent."

Hades folded his arms. "Do you want to be here?"

"Of course I do."

"Then act like it."

Monica spread her arms. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"I didn't mean that literally and you know it. You're an athlete and a performer. Don't give me any lip about the publicity part hindering your sportsmanship. A proper presentation *is* good sportsmanship."

Monica didn't say anything. What *could* she say? She knew she wasn't a typical athlete—nor was she a typical seventeen-year-old—but she also knew that Hades had chosen her because of her inconsistency in that respect. Else she would still be down on Earth.

"You know," said Hades, "they mentioned this in your file."

"Who mentioned what?"

"Your dark side. Doom and gloom—Gloomy. That was your nickname during your pre-elite days, right?"

"Yes," said Monica, stifling a groan, "it *was*, as in past-tense." The Keenes hadn't called her that since she was ten years old. They'd adjusted to her penchant for raw, technical performances, which weren't exactly flashy, but certainly intense. Gary had used her style as a team asset. Hades, on the other hand, was after conformity. Six identical little ladies marching in step.

"See?" Hades shook his head. "There you go, spacing out on me, considering, no doubt, all the hundreds of reasons I brought this up. Am I up to something? Am I merely concerned for your well-being? How your tireless little mind must be running itself dizzy just trying to figure out the sinister mechanics of Darren Hades, Patriot athletics, and everything else under the sun."

Though there was some truth in what Hades said, Monica was careful to keep her expression opaque. "I'm not manic depressive or an introvert or anything."

"Then why the cold shoulder all day? You've only been with us a week, yet you're acting like it's been a year. I don't expect any of my girls to take instantly to training aboard a space station, of all places, and I can understand an athlete having been cooped up here for months, but when a fresh-faced little tart decides to turn sour after her first *week*...well, I have to wonder about her dedication, her loyalty to the rest of her team, the rest of her term."

"All right," Monica said, taking a deep breath. "You want honesty?"

"Please."

"I don't like the way me and the girls are being kept locked up. I don't like how

we've been forced to forfeit our recoup day—we should be able to spend it outdoors without having to get permission in writing from you or Coach Stacie."

A look of confusion crossed Hades' face. "What are you talking about?"

"We tried to leave the stripe this morning, but Mr. Tompkins wouldn't let us. He said we needed your permission."

"Really, now?"

"Really."

Hades smiled. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe I just forgot to set up clearance with the stripe's security team?"

"Well...no. But what about the Internet? How come our video messenger is blocked?"

"Everyone's video messenger is blocked," said Hades. "There's a problem with the stripe's routing system. Mine's the same way. Look, I'll talk to Mr. Tompkins right after we finish up here. That way you can go to the promenade—the computers are working there. Will that make you happy?"

Monica nodded.

"Promise me something, though."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Play the part. You can hate me and revile my evil ways when you're away from the gym, but when we're together, there needs to be chemistry. I don't expect you to fall head over heels for me, but I do expect my best gymnast to work with me, in the training room, on photo shoots, and anywhere else we're required to get along for the greater good. I know it's a stretch, but can you do that for me?"

Monica nodded again and felt her apathy toward Hades diminish somewhat. She didn't know if he really thought of her as his "best gymnast," or if he was still putting on a show for the media folks, but his smile seemed genuine enough—and it would be beneficial to the team as a whole if she worked with her coach and not against him.

Maybe she *was* being too gloomy for her own good.

"Okay," she said. "I promise to get along better."

Hades pulled her close for a moment and kissed the top of her head. "It's all for show, Monica. Remember that and you'll do fine."

He walked away.

Chapter 22

Once every photo had been taken, every question asked, the girls were returned to their home stripe for showers and dinner. By now it was obvious Monica needed some time alone, so the others went about their business without bothering her, gathering their towels, their bags, and exiting the room quietly.

She sat at the computer, checked her e-mail. There wasn't anything from her family, but she did find a new message from John:

> Subject: From Your Secret Admirer
> From: "John Matusik" <johnmatusik@nwturners.ca>
> Date: Sun, 8 Nov 2099
> To: "Monica Sardinia" <msardinia@trinet.com>
>
> I hope you don't mind that I sneaked your e-mail address from the NAU roster, but I'll be at Tingri Cafe at 17:00, and I would absolutely love to buy you dinner, if you're not busy. Just give the transport the name and it should take you there. Hope to see you soon. :)

Oh, that boy! Monica thought, her melancholy instantly banished as she logged out, sprang from the desk to fetch her towel and a change of clothes. Hades had promised her free access to the promenade belt; she was going to test that promise.

* * *

At just past 17:00, Monica, accompanied by one of Tompkins' men (Kim—the short, stocky Asian), hopped off the transport outside of the restaurant.

John met her at the door, holding it open as she slipped inside. "You made it!" he said. Then, paying Kim a dubious glance: "And you brought a friend."

"Team policy," Monica said. "Didn't you get your own lug?"

John shook his head. "That's for the conferences and conventions. Here, well, we trust the Olympus screening process to weed out any troublemakers before they come aboard."

"What are *you* doing here, then?" Monica asked.

"Sleeper cell. Come on, let's get settled in."

John's table was set against the rear wall, where the brick-and-wood motif was decorated with several authentic-looking oil paintings. Monica seated herself and glanced over the menu.

"I called you earlier," John said, sitting across from her.

"Yeah," said Monica, "my team has been doing publicity all day."

"You've become quite the pop star."

"I can think of better ways to have spent my Sunday."

John smiled. "Well, there are still a few more hours before bedtime. You can just be Monica, and I'll be John."

Monica smiled back. "I'd like that."

"We'll start with dinner—my treat."

Glancing again at the menu, Monica suppressed a groan. "My coach would kill me if I had more than an iced tea." She fumbled in her purse, pulled out her carb card, waved it in the air. "This is his idea of responsibility."

John took the card, examined the chart. "You've done pretty well. I'd say there's room for us to share a thin-crust pizza. We can work it off later in the park." He handed the card back to her. "What do you say?"

"Bring it on."

As John waved over one of the waiters, Monica looked around the cafe, her gaze invariably falling on Kim. He stood a pace away, against the wall, staring stolidly out at nothing. It was kind of embarrassing: no one else in the restaurant had a bodyguard.

She leaned forward, whispered to John, "I feel bad for this guy. Everywhere I go, he has to go."

"Even the bathroom?"

"Well, I assume he'd stand watch *outside* the door."

John grinned. "Hmm...you could have fun with that. Go clothes shopping, make him wait in the women's section while you try things on."

Monica laughed, picturing it, considering. "Maybe next weekend, if my publicist doesn't have me wasting more time in front of the camera."

Momentarily, the waiter brought iced tea, and assured them that their pizza would be ready in a few minutes.

"I should try calling my parents," Monica said, glancing around for a terminal.

"Here," John said, pulling out a palm console from his jacket pocket. "It's my dad's, but I don't think he'd mind you using it as long as you keep the call brief."

"I'll try to be accommodating," Monica said, and took the console. She dialed her parents, waited. Unfortunately, no one answered. "Darn. They must be out." She thought for a moment, tried Sarah and Amy, with similar results. Finally, she got through to Pat.

"Hey, Monica," he said, throwing her the peace sign.

"Hey, Pat. Got a minute?"

"For you? Always. What are you up to?"

"Having dinner." Monica left her chair, stooped beside John, whom Pat eyed suspiciously.

"Who's the jock?" he asked.

"His name's John. He's on the Canadian gymnastics team."

John waved.

"Oh," said Pat, "so he's a pretty-boy."

Monica returned to her seat. "He's nice, not overly critical like *some* boys I know."

"Hey, I've done my homework," said Pat. "I know how all you Patriot-gymnast types work. The girls get points taken off if their bras or underwear show. The guys get lower start values if they don't wax their chests and armpits. You fall into a relationship with a hard-body like him and the two of you will never get out of the bathroom—you'll both be fighting over the tweezers and hot wax all day."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous."

"Jealous? No. I'm merely a realist. Say, I saw you on the news. That new coach of yours is one excitable woman."

"Well," said Monica, "she's the assistant coach, and as much of a thorn as she can be, Hades is the one to watch out for."

"That bad, huh? My guess is you didn't get his autograph."

"I don't know how he ever turned Patriot!" Monica paused, glanced past John to where Kim was standing. She wondered if he was listening, cataloging her conversation, ready to relay any signs of mutinous talk back to Tompkins. To Hades.

Lowering her voice, she continued: "I mean, he doesn't coach so much as he affronts. And he's pretty unoriginal with assembling routines. Everything's kind of loose and scattered—and he's always pointing out my weight problems, if you can believe it. I mean, back at KG, I was always bummed that I had *less* of a figure than some of my training partners!"

"He's crazy," said Pat. "You have the figure of a ten-year-old boy."

John nearly sputtered iced tea all over the table as he tried his darnedest not to burst out laughing.

"I'm going to kill you when I get home, Pat," Monica said. Under the table, she gave John a light kick in the shin. "And *you*...if you weren't buying me dinner, I'd have been out of here five minutes ago!"

Pat snorted, calling out, "You don't know what you're getting yourself into, Johnny! She's a maniac! I bet she's kicking you under the table this very moment, right? Run while you still can!"

Monica held the console at arm's length and winked at John. "American boys. They tend to mature slower than the rest."

"Ah," said John. "I'll keep that in mind."

Eventually Pat calmed down, citing excessive soda intake as the reason behind his hyperactivity.

"Are you going to behave?" Monica asked, re-framing herself.

"Normally I'd say no," replied Pat, "but I have a mountain of homework to finish. And your dinner's probably getting cold. Thanks for calling, though. I've missed our little chats."

"A pleasure, as always."

"Watch out for those wolves in sheep's clothing—cops, waiters, guys named John."

"I'll do that."

"Catch you later, Cheeks." Pat waved goodbye.

The video messenger flicked off.

Monica handed John the console. "Now you know why I've fled out into space."

"I'm sure he's only looking out for you," chuckled John. "He's being protective of his friend."

"Overprotective, actually."

"He's male. Men are passion, intensity."

"And women?" asked Monica, raising en eyebrow.

"Women are wisdom, patience."

"You're a bit cosmic for a gymnast."

"Am I?"

"Yes. You'd do well as a fortune teller."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know."

"You want me to read your fortune?"

Monica giggled. "Yes, please."

"Hold out your hand."

She held out her hand.

John took it, closed his eyes, put on a look of concentration. "I am seeing a high place, a place where the trees give way to a rolling hillside. I am seeing you and me sitting together and picking out structures in the distance."

"Wow. Prolific. You think it'll come true?"

"Yes," John said, opening his eyes. "But first we eat."

Monica felt a flutter in her stomach, knowing it was only partially caused by hunger pangs. Having lived most of her life as a competitive athlete, she had little experience when it came to dating, but she was now 99% positive that John was being more than just friendly. This was more than just dinner, too—it was a date. Her first date with a boy, sans the movie theater, sans the backseat of a car, perhaps, but a date nonetheless!

And she was smitten. John was the perfect gentleman, offering the waiter his compliments when the pizza arrived, offering her the first slice. She would have been perfectly content to sit back and shower him in quiet appreciation, listening to the sound of his voice, sneaking glimpses of his face, his neck, his shoulders—she devoured his presence as she devoured her meal, and was ashamed for it, though it was all she could do to keep from squealing in delight.

They finished their meal. Then, grabbing a pair of water bottles to go, John led the way outside and called a transport. When it arrived, he clasped Monica gently around the waist and lifted her onto the platform.

"Where are we going?" she asked as she fastened her seatbelt.

"Patriot Park," John said, sitting beside her (Kim came too, but by now he was nothing more than a shadow, an afterthought).

The transport promptly shifted into motion, breezing along the streets, from

the busy metro area, past the business district, and into more rural territory. Patriot Park, with its grassy hillsides, babbling brooks, abundant undergrowth, and winding trails, was an ample vein that cut across the middle of the promenade belt. At the drop-off point, Monica and John (and Kim) hopped off the transport, walked for a few minutes along one of the paths.

Upon reaching the foot of a rather steep hill, John pointed at the peak. "There's a great view at the top. You up for a little hike?"

"*Oh, my God,*" Monica said in mock awe. "It's just like in your vision!"

John rubbed his chin. "I'm pretty good, aren't I?"

"It remains to be seen." Monica started up the incline, following a weaving path all the way to the top—a good fifteen-minute exercise.

"Wow," John said, wiping his forehead and nodding in Kim's direction once they'd reached the summit. "He never tires, does he?" He handed Monica her water bottle.

She twisted off the cap, took a long, satisfying swig before looking over at Kim, whose uniform was sweat-stained. Another swig, and she replaced the cap. Then she leaned in close to John, whispered in his ear, "Let's lose him."

John glanced over his shoulder. "Won't you get in trouble?"

"I guess we'll find out," Monica said. She tapped John on the shoulder. "Tag—you're it!" she shouted, and stepped off the path, darted into the bushes.

"Ms. Sardinia!" Kim called. "Ms. Sardinia, stop!"

Even if she'd wanted to obey, Monica knew her body had a will of its own, and it was going to carry her where it pleased. The lack of control, however, was not unpleasant: her pulse was off the scale, and the thrill of the chase surged in her with the force of a full elite NCPA meet. She could see John over her shoulder, could hear Kim clambering several paces behind, out of sight, no doubt navigating by sound alone, trying to keep up with a pair of uppity young acrobats who were quite able to bend, stretch, and twist their way through the trickier sections without trouble. A few minutes of deft maneuvering and they reached a giant oak.

The perfect escape.

"I hope you can climb?" Monica asked, flashing a grin and stuffing her water bottle into her jacket pocket. She lifted herself up, finding finger holds and footholds. When she looked down, she saw John was right behind her. Some ways off Kim was still calling out for her to return to the path.

She crawled out onto one of the sturdier-looking branches. She was presented with a private view of the valley below—nothing spectacular, as the decline wasn't quite steep enough, and there were many surrounding tree branches in the way, but enough to warrant a perch.

John scooted out behind her, straddled the branch, leaned back and laughed. "This isn't exactly what I envisioned, but it'll do."

Monica tucked herself against him, reveling in his strong, steady arms as she took in the view, the promenade spread out before her, a complete miniature Earth sloping along the inside of a giant floating doughnut. For the first time since her arrival, she really *felt* Olympus, really felt the trees, the leaves—and John, sitting

behind her, close, so *close*, so cute, holding one arm around her waist, not at all sneaky like in the school dance stories Angeline told her where the boy was always trying to sneak his hand up the girl's shirt, not at all like when Hades guided her during practice, where it was all discipline, control—this was the exact opposite. An absence of discipline. A loosening of control.

"You suppose they'll make it snow for Christmas?" she asked after a while.

John looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't think they do seasons here. Not that I've heard, anyway. It's bad for tourism."

"That's a shame. It would look pretty."

"Not as pretty as you."

"Oh, stop."

"I mean it."

"You're going to spoil me with those cheesy lines of yours."

"Then I'll spoil you."

Monica swiveled around a bit, looked at him. "You're too sweet for your own good, you know that?"

He shrugged. "Sweet is better than sour."

"Are you sure your teammates didn't put you up to this?"

"Why, what ever are you talking about?"

"You know," said Monica, "buying me dinner, calling me pretty, getting me out here alone so you can corrupt me with your evil Canadian ways." She laughed. "You once said that I was the United States' secret weapon. Maybe *you're* the secret weapon, Mr. Matusik."

John stiffened ever so slightly. Oh, he was still smiling, still holding her, still looking her right in the eye—but something subtle had turned over inside. She could feel him compensating, trying to hide his tensions by stretching, clearing his throat—

I've put him off, Monica thought, suddenly self-conscious. *He's just being nice and I'm overanalyzing. Too much attention, or not enough.* Or maybe he'd only ever been interested in dinner, a pal, someone to spend time with, but not an actual girlfriend—

"Monica," said John, reaching up and tapping her gently on the forehead. "You're thinking about something, aren't you?"

She shifted in his arms, noting that the tension was gone. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean anything by...what I mean is, I tend to be very analytical when it comes to personal matters. I'm just wondering if it's too good to be true. Like, if you talk like this to all the girls."

"There are no other girls."

"Oh, so that's why you're so well-rehearsed."

John blushed, tensing again, looking away—and the source of his discomfort suddenly became obvious. "I don't think I'm at all well-rehearsed, but I've practiced."

"Practiced?"

"In front of the mirror. Sometimes I make notes, go over my routines in my

head. A guy should always know how to talk to a girl. I tell myself that if I can learn acrobatics, I can learn how to talk to girls."

Monica tried not to laugh. "So, there *are* other girls."

"No," said John. "I mean, there are girls and women at my club, and I've often imagined asking one out on a date, but there's little time for romance. I imagine it's been the same for you."

In hindsight, Monica could see how her life seemed somewhat lacking, socially—but those were the breaks if you wanted to compete as an elite. You gave up public school, you set aside your home life, you made friends with your training partners, and they were your world.

"Monica?"

John's face was inches away from hers; his bold features were intoxicating. "Yeah?"

"Would you mind if I did something forthright?"

"What exactly do you mean by 'forthright?'"

"I've wanted to do this since the day we first met, but a gentleman is supposed to get a lady's permission first—"

"I give you permission," Monica blurted, not letting him finish, knowing what he was getting at and refusing herself any further dissection of the situation.

John leaned forward, tilted his head, and kissed her. Instantly her mind recalled and compared, and instantly she realized how different it was kissing John instead of Pat. Needless to say, it was a pretty electric moment.

When it was over, she held him at arm's length. "That was your big bold thing?" she asked, smiling, giddy.

"Part of it," John replied. "Mainly, I wanted to ask you to be my girlfriend."

The blood was thundering in Monica's ears. A million equations fluttered through her mind, a million different ways to react when a boy asked you to be his.

Hemming and hawing, she said, "Oh, you silly guy. I've only known you for a week."

"I understand," John began—

—and stopped when Monica put her finger to his lips. "I'll have to think about it." She leaned forward and kissed him again, slightly less clumsily this time, and a little more daring. Then she rearranged herself in his arms and stared out across the valley, beautiful and serene in a sickeningly-sweet moment that was too perfect, too right to last forever—*but if I can have just one day a week like this, everything else will fall into place.*

Chapter 23

The *Flipz* shoot was a prime example of Monica's on/off relationship with Darren Hades. On some days she could tolerate the man with little more than a series of sighs and nods; other times she had to physically separate herself from him by walking off the podium, pretending to drink from her water bottle or work out a cramp. Having Sundays off helped, as cumulative pressure amassed during the workweek could be relieved at regular intervals. As long as Monica knew there would be a reprieve, she could stifle any manner of outburst, avoid any variety of argument.

For the most part.

By late November, all of Hades' and Stacie's preliminary observations had been completed, and the girls began working out full-fledged routines on bars, beam, and floor, with Hades choosing floor music, and Hades having final say as to which skills were kept, which were dropped, and how many superfluous pelvic thrusts and butt wiggles were to be utilized in between. Naturally, as the Keenes had been more apt to choose genres of music rather than actual tracks, ranges of skills rather than actual skills, this was a bone of contention for Monica. It wasn't so much the sex appeal element as it was the inability to add her personal touch to her routines. Ergo, she could swing her way around the bars, work her way along the beam, or tumble across the podium, and her kips, her layouts, her pikes and arabesques meant absolutely nothing.

John bumped into her toward the end of one particular morning training session, patted her on the back when she excused herself from bars work to get a drink of water. (In the weeks since their first kiss in Patriot Park, they'd taken to holding hands and making out during recoup time—though they were strictly professional in the gym.)

"Cramp?" he asked.

"Coach," she replied.

He squatted beside her. "Ah, one of those days, huh?"

Monica clenched her fists, curled her toes. "One day he ignores me totally, the next he wants me to perfect a dozen new skills by dinnertime! *Ugh!* How can someone so obsessed with consistency be so...so *inconsistent*?"

"I'd say he's trying to be dynamic," John said, "but you'd only kick me in the shin—and I've peeked across the room enough times to see he's not really the mentoring type."

"It's like that show, *Reality Cam*!" Monica exclaimed, sighing, thinking again of her KG days. Gary always made sure you knew where you were going, knew

what was expected of you. He worked with you to meet the appropriate deadlines. With Hades and Stacie, your skills were compartmentalized. You knew each and every skill, you knew how to connect said skills, but you had no idea what the finished routine was going to look like.

"Back on task, Monica!"

Monica looked up. Stacie had come to stand over her, arms folded, glare oscillating back and forth between John and herself.

John nodded, bowed out as Monica followed Stacie back to the uneven bars, resumed her practice. Five minutes in, though, and a ruckus over by the balance beam caught her attention.

Jackie was throwing a fit.

"No!" she shouted. "It's stupid—it's a stupid idea and I won't do it!"

Hades, standing with his hands on his hips, looked like he was about to blow a gasket. "Fine. Then you'll spend the rest of the day in your quarters."

"Fine!" Jackie hopped off the beam, stalked out of the training room.

Hades watched her go. The back of his neck had turned bright red—a bullseye that was attracting the attention of nearby athletes and coaches. After a moment, he waved Stacie over for a private discussion.

Monica walked over to where her teammates were gathered around the chalk bowl.

"What's that about?" asked Lena.

"Beats me," said Monica.

"He looks livid."

Britney ground her teeth nervously. "And right before lunchtime, too."

"Ten ameros says he makes us do extra push-ups this afternoon," said Kristen.

The girls watched as Hades pulled out his cell phone, punched in a number. In a moment he was juggling a conversation between himself, Stacie, and whomever was on the other end of the line. The result: a nod from Stacie, something whispered in Hades' ear. Then she approached the team.

"Britney," she said, "you're going to work on the balance beam with Hades for the remainder of this session. The rest of you will be doing bars with me."

"Is everything all right?" asked Monica.

"Petty details," Stacie said, looking none too pleased. "Back on task, please."

The matter was dropped until afternoon training, when, upon the girls' first stepping onto the lot, it was announced that Stacie would be handling Britney, Lena, Kristen, and Alana while Hades and Monica practiced alone.

"What for?" asked Monica as she and Hades parted from the group, Kim following several paces behind.

"Today we're going to work on your falls," Hades offered.

"My falls?"

"Yes—how to fall without hurting yourself. Jackie didn't seem to think it was worthy of her time. I hope you'll be more enthusiastic."

At first Monica thought he was talking about proper reactive techniques, lessening the chance of injury whenever she knew she was going to fall during a

routine.

"Not exactly," Hades said after she'd pressed for further information. "What I have in mind involves a more...proactive approach."

He led her across the lot and to a large shed—a spare gym, Monica realized as soon as they stepped inside and flicked on the lights. It was just large enough to accommodate a balance beam and some mats. And it was completely private, no windows, no straggling athletes watching on the sidelines.

She set her bag down, unzipped her warm-up suit. "Cozy, isn't it?"

Hades had Kim stand outside. He closed the door. "Concentration is a virtue, Monica. Not that I'm in any way doubting your mental disciplines, but I'm going to need your undying attention for the next few hours. No teammates chattering between drills, no boys waiting to gossip with you every time you have a drink of water."

Monica blushed, finished stripping down to her leotard. She'd thought John and herself had been discreet about their various interactions during training time, but obviously Hades had caught on. She wondered if he was at all aware of their blossoming relationship outside of the gym. If Kim had squealed, or if one of the security cameras had caught them during a make-out session...

"Help me out," Hades said, ducking under the beam and motioning for her to assist him in dragging one of the mats forward. Once they'd positioned it just right, he dusted off his hands and said, "Now, before we begin, know that anything that goes on in here is strictly between you and me. You will not discuss the skills you learn here with anyone. Not your teammates, not your family or friends."

Monica nodded, a silent thanks echoing in her head that he wasn't going to confront her about her love life. "Yes, sir."

"All right, up you go," Hades instructed.

Monica complied, mounting the beam, still not exactly certain what was going on as Hades had her do a run-through of her tumbling abilities. After a handful of passes, he began giving instructions—and suddenly Monica knew what he was after. He didn't just want her to protect herself during a fall, he wanted her to learn how to fall on cue—to fake a mistake and make it look absolutely convincing without damaging herself in the process.

During a break, she asked, "This is what Jackie was whining over?"

Hades nodded. "This is what she was whining over."

"Fake-outs?"

"It's how we're doing things this season."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but unless we're playing, like, golf, isn't it pointless to cheat by lowering my score?"

"Who says we're cheating?"

Monica shrugged. She sensed a scheme in the works, but she had no proof, only circumstantial evidence, an instinct. "I don't know. It just seems kind of sneaky, training out here alone, learning to fall on purpose—and with you yelling at us all week *not* to fall."

"I don't yell."

"Sure you do."

"I give instructions, I offer critiques—"

"At the top of your lungs."

"I *coach*."

Monica raised her hands. "Okay. You *coach*—but that still doesn't explain why I'm learning to do fake-outs."

A sigh from Hades. He'd been standing beside the beam, arms folded, but now he came to sit beside her. "You're learning to do fake-outs because it's what I need you to learn. During the course of a normal season I'd have a larger pool of athletes. I'd have the ability to manipulate the roster in order to better suit respective meets. With six girls locked in through Heroes' Day, that option is lost to me—adjustments have to be made in other ways."

"Sounds like you have your hands tied," said Monica.

"The NPAA pulls my strings, I pull yours. We'll manage."

"By teaching me how to fall?" Monica shook her head—the idea was still a level or two above her.

"By teaching you how to *adjust*. Sometimes you fall, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you keep in the full-twisting dismount, and sometimes you take out the twist. It's all adjustments, Monica."

"But—"

Hades held up his hand, pointed at the beam. "No buts. Let's continue."

Monica's stubborn side urged her to refuse, to demand further details, though it occurred to her that Hades hadn't chewed her out over her dating John (despite having briefly mentioned the fact). He knew—she was certain he knew—and he'd let her off without the obligatory lecture. *Trust?* she wondered. *Or an eye for an eye. I keep his secret, he trusts me not to do anything irresponsible with John. No premarital sex, no getting pregnant.*

Hades was waiting.

"All right," she said, getting to her feet and approaching the balance beam. "Let's continue."

Chapter 24

"You know how I can tell you're a gymnast?"

"How?"

"You're always just out of the shower."

Monica stirred in John's arms, opened her eyes a crack. They were curled together on one of the plush sofas in a corner of the NAU lounge. Several other athletes were hanging out as well, talking, reading, doing homework, watching the newsfeeds, playing video games. Every now and then a security guard walked by, glancing, surveying.

"You know how I know you're a gymnast?" Monica asked.

John put his hand over hers, brushed his thumb over her knuckles. "How?"

"The palms of your hands are tougher than the soles of your feet."

John chuckled. "Okay. You know how I know you're a gymnast?"

Monica waited.

"You use chalk more often than soap."

"Eww..."

"I've got more."

"I was afraid of that."

"The noise your ankles make while walking alerts people that you're near."

"I've got one."

"Yeah?"

"You've actually used the words 'virtuosity' and 'amplitude,' and you know what they both mean."

Gentle laughter caused John's abdomen to ripple. "Lots of syllables there."

"When you raise your hand in class, you have perfect form, arm straight, fingers pointed and together."

"You know how I know you're a gymnast?" asked John. "Your P.E. teacher tells you to do twenty pull-ups. You finish and ask what to do now that you've warmed up."

"I think I'll write that one down."

"In your circle of friends," John continued, "five feet is considered tall."

"*Humongous.*"

"You do your homework in a straddle split."

"Do you?"

"It's on my list of things to try before I die."

Monica closed her eyes again. Across the way, Dean uttered a guttural moan of disappointment as he lost another round of whatever game he was playing.

"So, where did you disappear to today?" John asked after a while.

"My coach had me do some extra credit," Monica replied.

"I hope it wasn't anything too humdrum?"

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

"You wouldn't kill me."

"Well, maybe *I* wouldn't, but Mr. Tompkins...he might."

John said, "He doesn't strike me as the cold-blooded killer type."

"No, he doesn't. I mean, he's huge—he could off someone with his bare hands if he wanted to—but he's more like a pro-bodybuilder who's serving as a night watchman on the side to fund his secret passion for gardening."

"You think he's ever killed anyone?"

"What, like this year?"

"Sure," John said. "A place like Olympus is great and all, but it only works if you have the military infrastructure in place. That includes big, hulking night watchman-bodybuilders armed with guns and the guts to pull the trigger."

"Do *you* think he's ever killed anyone?"

"Probably." John shrugged. "He wouldn't kill me, though."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm going to make it a priority not to tick him off in any way possible. In fact, I'm going to start baking him muffins on Wednesdays."

"You bake?" asked Monica.

"When absolutely necessary. My father's recipes."

"How come you've never baked *me* muffins?"

"I've never had to bribe you."

"How rude!"

"Hey, there's still time."

Dean shouted in triumph.

"Looks like he finally scored," said John.

"Yeah," murmured Monica.

Chapter 25

If Hades' initial lack of interest had been alienating, his absolute, undying attention during the weeks leading up to the Pre-Season Assessment was utterly unbearable. Eight-hour work days were not uncommon, and that wasn't counting school time. On any given occasion, if Monica wasn't in the gym, she was, just as in John's cliche, fresh out of the shower, her hair always wet, her gym bag always slung over her shoulder. Her uber-busy training schedule left her too tired, even, to argue with Hades or Stacie. From morning till lunch, afternoon till evening every day she perfected her routines, did her homework, went to bed on time. The few private moments she spent with John involved very little in the way of making out. It was just too much work to train full-time and simultaneously indulge her burgeoning passions now that the attention she'd so adamantly sought was hers and hers alone. Jackie and Britney were no longer the pets; she was, and it was wearing on her, no more so than it would have had she been gearing up for the new season under the Keenes' direction—but, then, they'd been stewards of their own little niche in Wisconsin.

This, however, was Olympus.

One of Those Days, a week into December: Hades had taken her to the private gym to work with her on her fake-outs, and nothing was going right (or wrong, as was more appropriate). Monica's body simply refused to mottle the skills drilled into it all morning; Hades' coaching instinct kept him from accepting defeat even when lunchtime was imminent.

"This isn't going to work," Monica said at last, hopping off the balance beam and wiping the sweat from her brow. Her left ankle hurt; there was a smidgen of blood streaking her right shin—a souvenir from a fake-out that hadn't been quite fake enough.

"It'll work if you keep at it," said Hades.

Monica glowered. "I'm going to split apart at the seams—arms, legs, and bits of hair and teeth everywhere!"

"We take a break, then continue until you get it."

Monica's stomach grumbled loudly. In the enclosed silence of the gym, the sound was even more pronounced than it might have otherwise been. "It's lunchtime. I'm starved. I can be at the cafeteria and back in half an hour."

Hades shook his head. "We have to get through this, Monica."

"But I'm hungry."

"I'm hungry, too."

"Well, there you go. Let's get some lunch."

Sighing, Hades said, "Back on the beam, Monica. We're finished when we're finished."

Monica folded her arms. "What about school time?"

"There'll be time for your letters and number later. Right now I need you *on the balance beam*."

"This isn't fair!" Monica protested. "The other girls are probably already on their way to the cafeteria!"

"Then you'd better hurry up and get your act together."

Monica started toward the door. "I've had enough! Enough, hear me? Enough!"

Her own pent-up animosity caught her by surprise. Still, it was enough to get her out of the gym despite Hades' shouting for her to stay put. She ran across the lot, to the checkpoint; the security officers waved her through. It wasn't until she was riding a transport out of the promenade belt that she realized she was barefoot, still in her workout gear—it couldn't be helped. She'd acted before thinking out the consequences. The immediate pressure of training with Hades had been relieved, though it had been replaced with certain dread that she would be reprimanded for trotting around the station out of uniform.

"Hello, Ms. Sardinia," said Tompkins as she breezed into her home stripe. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Monica replied, smiling nervously. She slowed long enough to add, "Misplaced my gym bag. I feel like such a dunce!"

Tompkins half smiled, half frowned. "I'm sure it will turn up."

Monica continued along the corridor, hastily let herself into her quarters (thankfully the girls weren't around to ask questions). She grabbed a change of clothes and then ducked out again for a shower.

Hades was waiting for her upon her return. He'd brought her bag, handed it to her as soon as she reached the cabin door. "I want you in uniform—now."

Monica bowed her head, surrendering herself to the situation as she entered her quarters once again and got dressed. When she was ready, she presented herself to Hades, who didn't say a word as he led her from the stripe. They stepped into the nearest lift. Moments later they were deposited in an area of the station Monica had never seen before. A pair of security officers screened them before letting them enter a carpeted lobby with historical portraits, a U.S. flag decorating the wood-paneled walls—

—*an executive suite,* Monica thought to herself as she took a seat. *I'm screwed.*

"There'll be a short wait," Hades said. "Afterward, I want you to report to Mr. McDonald's room." He turned and left.

Monica swallowed, waited, fidgeted, stared exclusively at the floor as she silently cursed ego, temper—every treacherous component of herself that had pushed her over the edge.

"Ms. Sardinia?"

Monica looked up.

The secretary was smiling amicably. "Commander Zor will see you now."

Chapter 26

Commander Zor, Monica took it, was the head honcho aboard Olympus. Or, failing that, he was one of the head honchos. Fifty-ish, gray-haired, slightly overweight, he sat behind his desk, hands folded neatly, various emblems decorating his uniform and sparkling in a combination of lamplight and reflected sunlight that shone through the sizable viewport built into the rear wall. His appearance made Monica feel quite inadequate in her simple, utilitarian flight suit. That, and he was a good foot and half taller than she was.

"Please, sit, Lieutenant," Zor instructed after the door swished shut.

Monica sat, wondered if being referred to by her military rank was anything like when her mother called her by her full name—usually when she'd done something wrong.

"Mr. Hades tells me," said Zor, getting right to it, "you're having some difficulty in your training."

It took a moment for Monica to answer. There was goose flesh on her arms, and her throat was constricted. She wasn't shy: wearing nothing but a leotard she could twist, bend, twirl, flex, stretch, and jump around in front of 15,000 spectators and not bat an eyelash. She could not, however, face Zor for more than a few seconds at a time without her teeth chattering.

After a handful of seconds-like-minutes spent watching the Earth dance outside the viewport, she managed, "It's nothing that can't be worked out, sir."

"Mr. Hades doesn't seem to think it's that simple. He says you walked out on him during practice."

Pinpricks in Monica's hands; blood rushing in her ears. "Well, um...yes, sir."

"Is the work too demanding?"

"No, not at all. Sir."

"Then perhaps the skills required are beyond your level of expertise?"

"No, sir."

Zor unclasped his hands, picked up a stylus and tapped it lightly on the desktop. "Nevertheless, you left your post before being dismissed."

Monica swallowed, thinking of protocol, responsibility. She wasn't a gymnast; she was an officer, a lieutenant, and her time in the training room wasn't just practice, it was her *post*. Her position in the United States Army. She'd walked off the job. "I...I acted improperly, sir. I was frustrated with my training and I allowed myself to act out of line."

"I don't doubt that the work you do is oftentimes frustrating," said Zor, "but what I'm concerned about is recurrence. There have been a number of occasions

on which you've demonstrated your somewhat extreme tendencies. Your coaches tell me that you're a fantastic athlete, and that you will not disappoint during the upcoming assessment meet, but you seem to have an affinity for confrontation."

Monica thought hard. "Some days are better than others."

"And Heroes' Day? Will it be one of the better days?"

"Of course, sir."

Zor smiled slightly and swiveled in his seat so that he could gaze through the viewport. If he was waiting for Monica to elaborate, he was sure to be disappointed because she was speechless, literally shaking in her boots. She'd much rather have been back in Hades' outhouse gym, taking orders, taking falls.

"Monica," he said after he'd let her stew awhile, "Olympus is a complex animal, the net effect of thousands of officers doing their jobs properly and in a timely manner. It takes cooperation. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, because in any operation of this size, teamwork is invaluable. You can liken it to the organs in your body: if one shuts down, it puts strain on all the others, and, if things aren't fixed, you get a cascade effect that results in death." Zor faced her. "Do you get along with your teammates?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you follow orders from your commanding officers?"

Monica assumed he meant Hades and Stacie. "Yeah...most of the time."

"'Most of the time' isn't good enough."

Monica said nothing.

Zor nodded, rose from his desk and stepped over to where an antique-looking telescope had been positioned beside the viewport. Hunching over slightly to peer through the lens, he asked, "Do you like your hometown? Your house, your parents' car, your phone and laptop computer, microwave oven, and all the other little things taken for granted that you've been afforded during the course of your life?"

"I do," Monica replied.

"That's good. Your loyalty to the Union has an incentive, but I think you're still locked into the self rather than the other."

"I don't understand, sir."

"You will." Zor adjusted one of the knobs on his telescope. "You see, your recruitment—and that of every man and woman aboard this station—was the result of momentum. Choices being made, plans being put into action. It's a global process in which each of us plays a small but important role, and it's crucial that there are no weak links, no festering wounds to threaten the health of the overall project. Our poor numbers these last few years could very well translate into the United States giving up its slot aboard Olympus—meaning we'd lose our momentum as a modernized civilization. Our ability to compete effectively in numerous economic markets would be crippled. Inner city schools would continue to go without up-to-date textbooks, computers, and lab equipment. Hospitals would have to face next year's flu season with less vaccine. Shelf prices

would continue to spiral out of control."

"We will have lost," Monica murmured.

Zor straightened, facing her. "You see, then, why it is of little importance whether or not you are in total agreement with your coaches. Their goal is the same as yours."

"To win."

"To win," echoed Zor. "To keep ourselves in the game so that future contenders may have a similar opportunity for success—just as previous athletes competed for your chance to be here today."

Monica thought of what Pat had said on the day they'd been caught doing wall-flips at school. "There's no war, but there's still conflict."

"Precisely. Such is the great paradox of humanity. But there *is* progress." Stepping away from the scope, Zor gestured at the eyepiece and said, "Look."

Monica put her eye to the scope, and suddenly the moon's distant surface became a panoramic view of the bustling lunar landscape. (The lens's software compensated for the station's rotation, revealing that the instrument itself was not entirely antiquated. As well, Monica's earlier unasked question was answered: Zor had *not* been staring directly into the sun all this time.)

"Americans, Britons, Russians, Indians, the Japanese," Zor said, "and a dozen other nations, all working together, coexisting in harmony, right?"

Monica pulled back. "They're all after a similar goal, like us. Despite their differences, they're working together."

"Those who make the cut, yes. Space is limited on the shuttle flights, and launches are expensive. Who decides who gets to go and when? We have our bids, but so do all the other industrialized nations of the world—and everyone is waiting on the edges of their seats for a slot to open up. Every four years. Like clockwork. Do you know who makes the decisions as to who goes and who stays behind?"

Monica shook her head.

"You do, Lieutenant Sardinia. Your scores, your teammates' scores, and the scores of every other athlete competing on Heroes' Day determine who gets funding and who gets the shaft, which research projects become tomorrow's medicine, and which remain the pipe dreams of America's sick and injured, which commercial endeavors will make or break your children's economy."

Monica felt her throat muscles tighten just a bit. Every schoolchild knew the ways of the Patriot world as sure as she knew her reading, writing, and arithmetic—but Zor had made it personal, as if Monica herself would go before a panel of military suits and run down a list of her team's scores.

"It may feel," said Zor, "as if the weight of the world has been placed upon your shoulders—but that's because, for better or for worse, the world is yours to inherit. Whether you're working here as a Patriot or down on Earth as a waitress, you will have to live by your choices, your successes, your failures. The same goes for your peers, your parents, friends, people you see on the news or out on the streets, people you'll never know but whose work will affect your everyday life. And it's not just us Terrans. Think of the Martian colonies. It's a three month trip there,

three months back. Time away from loved ones, time away from home. We're expected to do our job down here so that our counterparts can do theirs up there—with the satisfaction of knowing that upon their returning to Earth we will be able to send future Americans to continue where they left off. Can you imagine the disappointment in coming home to a third-world nation simply because one little girl didn't like the way the game was played?"

It was a rhetorical question. Of course Monica knew it would be selfish of her to bow out now (not that she'd even *considered* giving up as of yet). Her entire career pining to be a Patriot elite—her time at KG would amount to nothing if she simply called it quits. And how would she explain herself years down the line? How would she tell others that she'd turned her back on becoming a Hero?

Zor passed her a knowing look. "You see why it is so important for you to set aside your pride? To make your choice and follow through? We're all on the clock. To be frank, if you can't handle the pressure, it would be inappropriate for you to remain a member of the U.S. Patriot team."

Monica offered a quiet acknowledgment. It was clear Zor had absolutely no problem bearing an incredible load on the shoulders of a seventeen-year-old girl. If she couldn't stand up to his expectations, how was she going to manage it for a whole *country*?

Reclaiming his spot behind the desk, Zor roused his computer console and started typing. "I'll be seeing you at the assessment?"

"Yes, sir," said Monica.

"Excellent. You are dismissed, Lieutenant."

* * *

By the time Monica made her way to Mr. McDonald's room, class was already half over. Without going into too much detail, she explained her absence and then took a seat, worked on her assignments in relative solitude. When it was time for everyone to push their seats together and participate in group discussion, she offered only "yes" and "no" answers, silent shrugs whenever Lena or Kristen leaned over and softly asked if she was all right.

Later, during afternoon practice, she lined up with the rest of the girls as roll was called, and started her warm-up exercises without a word to anyone. John waved to her from across the way. She refrained from waving back, hoping that he would understand: no more playing around. *Business is business. Even if I only manage it for the rest of the day, I* will *be the model gymnast in Hades' gym. I won't let them crack my resolve—I won't let myself sit through another lecture from Commander Zor.*

She kept her promise. As the day wore on, as time ran short and demeanors crumbled, every single member of the U.S. women's gymnastics team was yelled at, chewed out—but not Monica. Her game state channeled adrenaline, kept frustration at bay while her teammates went from grimly determined to just plain grim.

On the way to the showers, Jackie decided to play counselor. "What's with you?"

"I've got a lot on my mind," Monica responded.

"You mean *him*?" Jackie pointed at John, who was following his team toward the men's showers, glancing over his shoulder at regular intervals to see if he could catch Monica's attention.

Monica turned, waved, smiled in a morose fashion. "No."

"Well, what?"

She waited until they were in the locker room, then set her bag down, started removing her hairpins. "How did you take it when they told you the details?"

"What details?" asked Jackie.

"You know, how we're competing for our government's ability to send astronauts to the moon and Mars and all that?"

Jackie shrugged. "You get used to it. It's kind of like when you're little and you find out for the first time that all those people in Africa are being made to work in cornfields inside the Barrier so that fuel pumps have fuel. It's the way the world is."

"But doesn't it bother you to know that if you mess up a skill connection, a school or hospital might close?"

"Oh, Monica, it's not that black and white." Jackie laughed.

"Isn't it?"

"It's all symbolism. Don't fret." Jackie left Monica's side, went over to where Britney and Lena were standing and started a lighter conversation.

Monica frowned, wondering if Jackie was being dismissive or if she really didn't know the score. Unless Zor had been exaggerating, trying to get her all worked up as a sort of punishment for walking out on Hades—but no, even if, as Jackie had said, the Patriot world wasn't "black and white," the overall idea was real: young men and women—*boys and girls*—were competing for worldly resources.

Once upon a time in a sweltering little gym back on Earth, Gary Keene had told her much the same.

Chapter 27

December was quickly reduced to a cluttered memory scrapbook: Monica in the training room, Monica in the shower, in the cafeteria, Mr. McDonald's classroom, back in the gym, back in the shower, back in the cafeteria, back in bed. The pattern carried her into the final throes of the month, when winter break was but a day away, a coveted promise waiting beyond the last hurdle: Pre-Season Assessment.

The team trained efficiently for several hours in the morning. Monica's bars and beam routines were feeling pretty good, though she was hesitant to breathe a sigh of relief until after the assessment was over and done with.

Half an hour early, Stacie signaled it was time to prepare for the review panel's arrival.

She approached Monica as she was gathering up her things.

"Your new competition leotards," she said, handing Monica a box. "Make sure the girls are properly suited up. No creases, no loose spots. I'll be along shortly."

Monica slung her bag over her shoulder, took the box and followed the others into the locker room, where everyone gathered around in anticipation as she handed out the new threads. There were mixed reactions—particularly to the leotards' ample keyhole fronts and low-scooped backs.

"These don't leave much to the imagination, do they?" snorted Lena, holding hers up.

"It's called *putting out*," explained Jackie. "Or did you think the stores had simply run out of fabric at your last NCPA meet?"

"Right," added Monica. "Predesigned wedgies, an abundance of bare skin, an exploitation of contour—the mandatory qualities of any good elite, didn't you know?"

"Now you're getting it," Jackie said, laughing.

Lena stuck her tongue out.

"At least they're not thong-bottoms," Kristen pointed out, and headed for the shower.

The girls washed up, suited up. Monica had them stand in a line so that she could give them the look-over. She couldn't help but notice that everyone—herself included—had grown up just a little bit over the last month and a half, their jaw lines sharper, the swelling around their eyes more pronounced, their torsos approaching the leaner side of lean.

Stacie came in for the final inspection. If someone's butt crack wasn't defined well enough, she did a touch-up, whipping out the hairspray and making her adjustments. The idea was to showcase chiseled physiques painted in Olympus

colors—comic book superheroes. Gymnasts. Patriots.

Approved for consumption, Alana stood waiting by the entrance, a somber look on her face.

Monica approached her. "Pre-meet jitters?" she asked.

"I'm not ready for this," Alana replied.

"Sure you are." Monica recalled their morning practice; Alana hadn't missed any of her routines. In fact, she was the most well-rehearsed of all the girls, suffering the least amount of injuries. "You've got nothing to worry about."

"Don't I?"

"You were brilliant this morning. You'll be brilliant during the assessment—and on Heroes' Day."

"That's the problem. If I pass, that means I'm part of the team. That means the next time I compete it will be for the United States. I don't know if I can handle that."

"You can handle whatever you put your mind to."

"But I don't know if I *want* to."

Oh, lord, Monica thought. *Heck of a time for a freak-out!*

At that moment Stacie started toward the door. "Are we ready, ladies?"

"We are," said Monica.

To Alana: "You'll do fine."

* * *

The Assessment was, for Monica, a repeat of her final day at Keene's Gymnastics. A row of military men—Zor included—sat at the edge of the training area (which had been emptied, the other NAU teams lined up outside) and waited for the team to complete a brief warm-up. Then, exchanging nods with Hades, Zor raised his hand and said, "Begin."

Alana was up first. Monica whispered a few last-minute words of encouragement into her ear. Alas, it didn't seem to have much effect. She took to her routines with little of the confidence she'd shown during practice. She seemed terribly distracted, hopping on her landings, wobbling on the beam, and even shedding a few tears after missing an elementary kip element on bars. At first Monica thought it was perhaps part of Hades' fake-out regime, but when she saw the looks of frustration on his face every time she made a mistake, she knew this had nothing to do with planned strategy.

Stacie looked surprisingly nurturing as she led Alana away afterward. She coddled her in the corner.

Jackie went second, and though she looked concerned over Alana's performance, she nevertheless made it through her routines with only the barest mistakes here or there. Britney and Kristen followed next, performing in a similarly flawless manner.

Monica was fifth, stepping forward when Hades called her name.

"Mount the beam, please," he said.

She mounted the beam, stood waiting, perfectly balanced.

"Back handspring to back tuck to switch leap."

She performed the skills, landed delicately, waited.

"Straddle L to press handstand."

Lowering and supporting herself with her arms, she held her legs parallel to the beam, straddled, then rotated her hips and lifted upward until she was in a handstand position. She held this for a moment before righting and waiting.

"Back, tuck, back, back."

Monica did exactly as she was told. This went on for several minutes as she cycled through her various skills and connections, showcasing strength, flexibility, and balance.

Then, the moment of truth:

"Double back, with cop-out."

Cop-out. Hades' keyword for "intentional screw-up." Fake-out. Monica launched into her set. Upon landing the second handspring, she made sure her left foot was planted firmly on the beam, made a well-practiced slipping motion with her right, pretended to overcompensate, and went down headfirst, her torso nearly slamming against the beam, legs flexing and attempting to keep the rest of her aboard, but to no avail. After a moment's clinging to the underside of the beam, she dropped onto the floor, presented to the military men, and then remounted. Waited.

"Same set," said Hades. "No cop-out."

Monica redid her tumbling pass, this time without the drama.

"Thank you. You may dismount."

Monica complied, jogging over to where her teammates were as Lena was called up.

Jackie had a questioning look on her face. "*Cop-out*?"

Monica cocked her head to one side, surprised. "Fake-outs. You haven't learned any?" She'd assumed Hades had been taking the other girls aside to work on their acting skills as well.

"I was *going* to learn them." Jackie almost looked hurt. "But Hades never gave me a second chance after I yelled at him. I thought he'd thrown in the towel with that sly stuff."

"Obviously not," said Britney, glaring accusingly at Monica. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Monica was beside herself—as if she were somehow conspiring against her own team by training privately with Hades. "I've been working my rear off these last two weeks. To be honest, gossip wasn't at the top of my to-do list. Anyway, I thought you knew."

Jackie and Britney stepped away, conversed among themselves in hushed tones.

"So, that's what you've been working on with Coach Hades?" asked Kristen.

"Yeah," Monica replied.

"Sneaky. I don't like it." Kristen shook her head. "The longer I stay here, the less I like the way they do things."

"I think Alana would agree with you."

"Speaking of Alana..." Kristen trailed off, smiled politely as Alana was integrated back into the group. She didn't say anything, but Monica could see it in her tear-streaked face: *I want to go home.*

Lena finished her beam work and was excused from the podium. She high-fived everyone but Alana, whom she paid a worried, almost dissatisfied frown.

"What's her problem?" she whispered into Jackie's ear.

"Freak-out."

"No duh," Britney muttered under her breath.

Monica glanced at where Hades was conversing with Zor and his men. Stacie, nearby, waited with her arms folded, not saying anything to anyone. Eventually she came over and, in a hushed tone, told the girls to gather their things.

"How'd we do?" asked Jackie.

Stacie held her finger to her lips. "We'll discuss it later. Go get cleaned up. Mr. Kim and Mr. Cross will bring you back to the home stripe."

* * *

John met her in the NAU lounge.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in forever," he said, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her up so that her face was level with his.

After a polite peck on the lips, Monica asked, "Did you make the cut?"

"Yeah." John nodded. "Did you?"

"Yeah."

"We're Patriots now. Well, in a slightly more official manner."

"Funny," said Monica, "I don't feel like a Patriot."

John glanced around to make sure no one was looking, then pinched her thigh. "Sure you do."

"Stop that, you brute," Monica said (though she let him remove his hand at his own discretion). "How much time do you have?"

"Our shuttle leaves the hub in half an hour."

"I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss me, too."

She pushed him away, hugging herself and pretending to pout.

"Oh, *sorreee*," John cooed, taking her in his arms again and smooching her deliciously on the cheek. "I think it's crazy that they're keeping your team here for Christmas. How in the world are you going to pass the time without me to bug you?"

She glanced around at the unadorned lounge (holiday decorations weren't allowed, so as not to alienate any given religious affiliations). A random Patriot woman was sitting at one of the tables and typing quietly on her laptop. "The NPAA wants us up here 24/7. We'll have Christmas Day off, probably New Year's —otherwise our coach wants us to start training for our first conference of the season. How about you?"

John shrugged. “The girls at my gym are having their annual gala. I get to help run the show, make sure all the equipment is set up properly—child labor stuff.”

Monica laughed.

“Besides that I guess there’ll be the usual family get-together—”

“John!” Dean called from the lounge entrance. “Come on, time to go—oh, bye, Monica! Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Monica said, waving.

John picked up his bags, kissed her once more. “See you on the other side.” He followed Dean out of the lounge.

Steeling herself against a jolt of homesickness, Monica sighed, glanced once more around the nearly-empty lounge, and decided she might as well head back to her quarters.

Out in the corridor, a few paces along, she noticed a small congregation gathered outside room 15.

“What’s going on?” she asked as she drew up to the group, comprised of her teammates, Linda, Stacie, Kim.

“Oh, Monica, there you are,” sniffed Linda, dabbing at her cheek with a soggy handkerchief. “We’re saying our goodbyes.”

For a moment Monica didn’t understand—and then she saw that Alana was wearing her street clothes, and that she had her bags with her.

She was going home.

“Wow,” Monica said, hugging her tight. “It seems like only yesterday we were figuring out who got top bunk.”

“That’s why I have to go,” said Alana. “Up here, time goes too fast. I didn’t think it would bother me, but...I’m tired of missing the little moments that matter.”

Who cares? Monica wanted to say. *We made it past the assessment, all of us—you’re* this *close to competing for America! Don’t leave!* But it was Alana’s decision to make, and she’d made it, even though there would undoubtedly be consequences. (Over Alana’s shoulder, Monica saw Stacie frown, not looking particularly pleased. She said nothing, however.)

Snap-snap. Linda was taking pictures.

Alana pulled back, smiled. “I’ll watch all of your competitions on TV.”

“And I’ll write every chance I get,” promised Monica.

Alana nodded at the others, followed Kim out of the stripe.

Stacie faced the remaining girls. Her frown seemed to have etched itself permanently into her face. “I needn’t remind you that Alana’s leaving is strictly classified?”

A collective nod from everyone.

Stacie walked away.

“That was quick,” muttered Jackie after she’d gone (and after Linda had stepped off to the side to make a call on her phone). “Did she tell any of you she was quitting?”

The girls shrugged; Monica remembered what Alana had said in the locker

room—the sum of a dozen different worries and self-doubts exhibited since the beginning.

"I guess she just didn't have what it takes," said Britney.

"Shame," said Lena.

"Yeah," agreed Kristen. "I wonder who's going to replace her?"

"Hopefully someone with the slightest hint of a backbone."

The girls (all but Monica) laughed, sighed, looked as if a burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

They don't feel it, Monica thought, returning to her quarters, laying on her bed, pressing her hand against the bulkhead—feeling Olympus' subtle vibration travel through her fingertips. *They're too young or ignorant to understand. It's happening —it's* been *happening. The same affliction that broke up the last U.S. Patriot team is now affecting us, and Alana is the first casualty.*

Chapter 28

Monica woke early on Christmas morning with sleigh bells ringing in her ears—her alarm clock's gleeful demonstration that it had remembered the appropriate holiday.

"Merry Christmas," Lena yawned. She pulled the sheet over her head and shifted onto her side.

Kristen remained asleep.

Dressing in sweatpants, T-shirt, and sneakers, Monica grabbed her laptop and left the room, went down the corridor and into the lounge. She found herself a table and, firing up her video messenger, called her parents.

Sharon answered. She looked tired, but as soon as she saw Monica her mood brightened. "Monica! Hi, sweetie! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Mom." Monica squinted, catching various unfamiliar background details—she'd been expecting to see the dusty, cluttered backdrop of Aunt Deborah's basement, but instead she saw a spiral staircase, a plush-looking sofa set and big-screen TV, a towering, glittering Christmas tree that easily reached from floor to ceiling. *Of course,* she thought. *The new house.* She'd spoken to her family on several occasions, but everything had been a blur, the details lost in all the noise. Somewhere in their conversations the new NPAA-sponsored home had been mentioned. Even so, it was strange, almost surreal to see her family's timeline unfolding alongside her own. She was an observer now, no longer a participant, her only link home a rectangular video messenger window.

"So, you guys are in Milwaukee now?" she asked.

"Sure are," replied Sharon. "Pretty much settled in. You're going to *love* your new room."

Monica smiled. "What time is it there?"

"Just past midnight. Chris is in bed. Your father and I are playing Santa."

There was movement in the background. Mike, wearing a floppy-looking Santa hat, was placing a small armful of wrapped gifts beneath the tree. Sharon called him over to the console.

"Monica! How are you?" he asked, scooting beside her.

"Fine. Just woke up. How's everyone?"

"Great, better than ever. Well, we're missing you terribly, but things are going well. Look at you! You're sturdier and stronger every time I see you. I can see it in your shoulders, in your arms. They been working you hard up there?"

"It's nothing I can't handle," said Monica, remembering her meeting with Zor. "I passed the Assessment. I'll be competing for the U.S. starting in January."

Sharon whooped joyfully, planted a big, wet kiss on Mike's cheek. "Oh, sweetie! Congratulations! Our champion!"

"Thanks," said Monica.

They talked for a while, her parents eventually insisting on giving her a virtual tour. Carrying Sharon's phone with them, they showed her the upstairs first, taking her into her new bedroom, which they'd decorated with all her medals, trophies, and certificates. The bathroom had a walk-in shower. On the ground floor, they passed through the largest kitchen Monica had ever seen and stepped out onto the pool deck—they had their own swimming pool!—which overlooked a spacious backyard. Mike held the phone up and did a panoramic sweep that ended with a shot of the house itself, barely visible in the subtle light, but impressive nonetheless. (Monica didn't say anything, but it felt extremely good knowing that her time as a Patriot had paid for a new house, a new start—she was a contributing family member again.)

After the tour, Mike and Sharon said their goodbyes, blowing her kisses and waving as she signed off. She sat for a minute or two, tingling all over, a long-delayed thrill taking hold.

Her training had finally begun to manifest real-world results.

Not feeling like getting on with her morning just yet, she called Pat next, knowing that he was probably still awake. Indeed, he appeared on the screen after only a few seconds.

"What's up, Monica?"

"Hi, Pat."

"Wow. You on the Hollywood starlet diet?"

"Apparently so," Monica replied, a bit self-conscious now that both her father and Pat had noticed her physique. "Compared to the other girls, I'm not only over the hill, but morbidly obese, too."

Pat shook his head. "You weigh like, what, eighty pounds?"

"My coach wishes I did."

"Darren Hades."

"Yeah."

"Seems to be working. He's got you all...defined."

"Image over fundamentals."

"The Patriot way. How's Johnny?"

"*John*," Monica corrected.

"Yeah. Him."

"He's fine. Home for the holidays."

"I know you like him, what with his super-huge muscles and perfect coordination. Is he a good kisser?"

Monica grimaced. "Pat!"

"I'm only joking. Your love life is none of my business."

"No, it isn't."

Pat looked away from his phone. Monica could see him biting his lower lip. Near the bottom of the video frame she spotted his right arm; the friendship

bracelet he'd made at the mall was clasped around his wrist.

"Oh, Pat," she said after a lengthy pause. "Don't be upset."

"I'm not upset," Pat replied, sighing, facing the camera again. "Not anymore. And even though you're with someone else now...I'm still going to have a crush on you till the day I die—but that's fine, because as long as you're happy, I'm happy."

"Corny line." Monica took a deep breath, let it out. *Enough with the emotional stuff.* "Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Merry Christmas. You ready for the new season?"

"I think so."

"You'll be getting me front-row tickets to all your conferences, right?"

"I'll have to look into that."

Pat smirked. "Just add me to the duty roster. I'll be your bouncer or a janitor or something."

"You want me to hack the roster?"

"Yeah, baby," laughed Pat. "Break out your inner geek and show me those mad coding skills. I bet you could do it too, if you let me give you a few lessons."

"I wouldn't talk like that," warned Monica. "The security team is probably monitoring us."

"I'm sure of it—but they know I'm just kidding." Pat made an angelic face. "See? Harmless!"

Monica stretched in her seat. "I should go before you get me into trouble."

"Fine, then. We'll start Lesson One next time. Good luck, Monica."

"Thanks."

Chapter 29

For Team USA, the week preceding the new year was one big shopping spree, instigated and directed by Linda, who insisted a little therapeutic spending was necessary to soothe the nerves and soften the credit accounts. Monica took great pleasure in being able to buy herself a new purse, a handful of outfits, and presents for her family—all with her own money. She and her training partners also spent a lot of their time in the promenade belt, with Stacie surprisingly chaperoning trips to the movies, the swimming pool, the spa, and wherever else the girls wanted to go (Hades had skipped out after the Pre-Season Assessment—shore leave, supposedly).

Apart from her group activities, Monica spent a lot of time in the lounge with her laptop. Watching videos, listening to music, and swapping messages with friends were equally effective methods of passing the time, and they allowed her to maintain a connection to the Terran world below, which was surprisingly serene. No word of radical movements or political snafus, no stock market scares or food shortages. For the moment, it seemed people were behaving themselves, living life in manageable bites. Sarah was going steady; Amy had mastered her flyaway doubles; Angeline's mom had finally let her change her hair style—and John, well, he was playing pen pal, writing every day and oftentimes sending pictures or videos to elaborate on his comings and goings. Monica's favorite: "A Day in the Life of a Turner," as filmed by John Matusik. He'd brought a video camera to his gym and put together a ten-minute documentary that included a tour, interviews with his training partners, and a bare-bottomed shot of Dean (who was none too happy about being recorded without warning—even if his naughty parts had been politely filtered out) in the shower.

New Year's involved an unexpected late night trip to the Olympic Arena, where several thousand military and civilian elites—resident crew members and paying tourists—had gathered to ring in the new year. It was an appropriate introduction to the arena, with live music, a light show, and the unveiling of the new Global Olympic Mural, which was a pseudo-3D world map hologram that would display all the major competing nations' standings once the season got underway (the hologram was also fed to most major cities, to be flown overhead round-the-clock).

Monica, pressed between her teammates, Linda, Stacie, the three bodyguards, and a squirming mass of super-jovial spectators, watched and clapped and shouted at the top of her lungs along with everyone else as the mural was ignited, as the arena's towering stonework gods and goddesses—the Twelve Olympians—were illuminated by the Patriot glow.

And down on Earth, watching the spectacle via their TVs and computers and cell phone screens, the masses readied their mental tallies, began their months-long vigil as they watched and waited for their chosen elites to deliver them from the doldrums.

Chapter 30

The first week of January was marked by the return of Olympus' athletes—as well as the arrival of Alana's replacement, an alternate from California whose name was Autumn Ray (*Autumn Ray!*). Appearing quietly during morning practice, Autumn was the epitome of decadent elitism: small, raven-haired, dark-eyed, obedient, fifteen going on twelve, easily lacking the extra poundage that weighed down Monica's supposedly grotesquely hulking physique—she did whatever she was told, never complaining, never disagreeing with anything her coaches did or said.

"How many different kinds of meds do you think her parents have her on?" Jackie asked when it was time to wash up for lunch.

Monica wiped the sweat from her brow and gathered up her things, paid a glance at Autumn, who was standing beside the podium and patiently waiting for Linda to complete an impromptu photo shoot. "She's the perfect athlete, two parts machine, one part human."

"I remember thinking the same thing about you when we first met."

"Really?"

Jackie smiled. "Yeah."

Kristen, swallowing the last bit of water from her bottle, frowned and looked at Monica. "You really think she's got augmentations?"

Monica rolled her eyes. "I was speaking figuratively."

"I know," said Kristen. She blushed and looked away.

"Maybe she's mental," said Britney. "On the news they say kids with certain kinds of ADD are good at repetitive tasks—and you know gymnastics is all about repetition."

Jackie gave Autumn a disapproving look. "I don't care. She's still creepy in that California-Goth valley girl way. Probably into candles and incense and industrial metal music."

"Don't fret," said Monica. "I'm the one who has to share a bunk with her."

Lena put her hand on Monica's shoulder, shook her head, and walked toward the locker room.

Monica zipped up her bag. Over in the Canadian section, John was finishing a bars set, landing, presenting, glancing briefly in her direction. She waved, but he turned away, apparently preoccupied, his face caught between a look of disappointment and desperation—he'd been like that all morning, and it had shown in his work, which had been uncommonly sloppy. She hoped his father wasn't coming down on him too hard.

She wanted to go over to him and offer a few words of encouragement, but Stacie caught her by the shoulders and steered her toward the women's shower room.

"On task, please."

On task, please, Monica mimicked silently.

* * *

Ten minutes before the lunch hour was up, John arrived at the cafeteria.

Monica had been watching the entrance hopefully. Now she got up, gathering the girls' trays (as was her habit) and dumping them into the recycler. She joined John at the food kiosk, tapped his shoulder.

He paid her a weary glance. It looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep the night before. "Hey, Monica."

"Rough practice?"

"Oh, no worse than any other day, I guess." He looked around the cafeteria for a moment.

Monica pouted. "But you seem so tense."

"It's just nerves. My first competition is coming up next week."

"You don't have any nerves," Monica said, and poked his chest. "Just muscles."

John smiled, but Monica could tell he wasn't at ease, the way he swallowed, the way he kept looking in the direction of his table, where the rest of the team had finished lunch without him. Something had changed drastically over the winter holiday—something big.

"Is everything all right?" Monica asked. "Are *you* all right?"

John took a deep breath and let it out, and momentarily the tension was gone, banished with the blink of an eye. (In hindsight, it was obvious that he'd merely invoked his well-rehearsed game state, but for now it was enough that he was himself again, easygoing, serene.) "I'm fine. Just a little trouble with my tricks today—but here I am ignoring the perks of working aboard Olympus." He stooped quickly and kissed Monica on the cheek. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to be seen."

The food kiosk presented John with his tray. "Well, I've got ten minutes to scarf my food, so I'll probably not be much in the way of conversation, but you're more than welcome to join me at my table."

Monica nodded, and would have accepted the invitation if she hadn't at that moment looked over her shoulder and spotted Stacie on a collision course.

John winked knowingly.

"Oh well," said Monica. "I suppose we can play catch-up on Sunday."

"There'll be time," John said. "We'll *make* time." He picked up his tray, winked, and left for his table.

Chapter 31

The Romanians won the bid for the Incept Conference, a head-to-head meet that was being hosted at the University of Houston's Hofheinz Pavilion.

"This will be a good start for you girls," said Linda during the shuttle ride. "8,500 seats, not too big, not too small, an international media presence, your first multinational audience—oh, can you *feel* the excitement?"

The only thing Monica felt were the butterflies in her stomach, as well as the old, familiar fear keeping her as far away from the window as possible.

"You look nervous," observed Lena.

Brilliant deduction, Monica thought—though the forthcoming conference was only a small part of it. 8,500 anxious, expectant, scrutinizing fans? No problem. A half-hour ride from skyport to sports arena? Terrifying.

"Aren't *you* a little nervous?" she retorted (she felt no desire to reveal her fear of flying at the moment, and was glad Jackie and Britney were riding in a separate shuttle so that they couldn't meddle).

Lena shook her head. "I think it's easier to perform in front of a large crowd. There are too many people to keep track of, and so they all just sort of blend into one gigantic mass. But with one or two, or ten or twenty, you can feel each set of eyes on you. Like feather touches." She shuddered, looked away.

The shuttle eventually arrived at the Pavilion, its monolithic exterior spiffy clean from recent renovations and bearing the Patriot emblem atop a lofty steeple. Despite the fact that it was morning, the place was already mobbed—not by fans, however, but by protesters.

Lena, Kristen, and Autumn (in her own subtle way) looked concerned.

"What's wrong?" Monica asked Stacie as she followed Kim and Cross out of the vehicle.

"Nothing," Stacie replied. "We're right on schedule. Follow me."

"But what's with all the, er, *people*?"

"They're entitled to their opinions."

Linda, helping to distribute the girls' gym bags, added, "You see a lot of this at the Patriot level, sweetie. The video feeds are usually tamed, but the Patriot conferences themselves are oftentimes hotbeds for political demonstrations. No worries, though. Mr. Tompkins and his muscle men are on the job."

At the head of the procession, Tompkins straightened slightly, his massive frame very nearly bristling. He motioned everyone forward. A fleet of police officers kept the masses behind the temporary fencing as Monica and her teammates made their way inside the Pavilion. Even then, the righteous chants

echoed in Monica's brain:

"Boycott Heroes' Day!"

"Save our children from the Patriot regime!"

"There are no Heroes, only victims!"

"Don't go in there, little girl! They'll steal your childhood!"

It was a relief when the doors were closed, and the protesters' banter was reduced to muffled background noise.

"Fact of life," Stacie muttered to Linda at the checkpoint. "You could be opening a new county hospital or running a marathon to raise money for charity, and someone would still find a reason to show up with a sign and a bull horn."

"Oh, isn't it just shameful?" Linda said, frowning for a change. "Another Olympic year to be spent bickering among ourselves instead of banding together to improve the national rank. You'd think we were grave robbers with a reception like that!"

"Cradle robbers," corrected Stacie, chuckling dryly.

In the dressing room, conversations lingered on the protest outside. Even Jackie and Britney, usually more interested in pop tracks and hairstyles, joined the fray upon their arrival, weighing the pros and cons of freedom of speech as if it was round table time with Mr. McDonald.

Monica, for the most part, kept out of it, changing and quietly fussing with her hair in front of the mirror. Watching the news at home, it was easy to toss around opinions about what the "idiots in the media" did from day to day. But now that she was a Patriot, now that she was one of the idiots, it was...different. She was preparing to compete for those very same people who were shunning her, her work (hardly a novel concept, for during her junior elite days she'd known that not everyone in her hometown agreed on the Patriot System as the way to go—even though they readily accepted the credits brought in by her winnings). She wondered if the Romanians would have to endure a similar welcome.

Luckily her tight schedule made it difficult to dwell on petty details. Practice, lunch, an hour at the hotel arguing with Hades and Stacie over this and that, and it was showtime. Lights, camera, action. Whatever gripes the girls and their coaches had behind the scenes were promptly set aside, replaced with irresistible smiles, perky postures, and glowing dispositions for the first official march-in of the new season. Young men and women, uniformed and leading the gymnasts in step, hefted their rifles, twirled their batons, turning, saluting, holding for applause—it was a portrait of patriotism, even though Monica's stomach was queasy and her palms tingling. She could see herself on the jumbo screens, her teammates and the men's team as well, and it was just like on TV. As a fan, you noticed the security officers in the background, you knew they were there, but your focus was always on the athletes, your attention lulled by the commentators. Now, during this brief in-between moment, Monica could see it all, the tension in Tompkins' body, how his eyes seemed to be looking everywhere at once, struggling to discern fan from foe —she could feel it too, here where the spectators' cries were nearly 9,000 loud, here where the sweat was already beginning to build beneath her clothes, where her toes

were curling in her sneakers, her legs taught, ready for something, anything.

The first rotation began.

Hades' blatant scowl deepened when the Romanian girls alighted on the podium. They were all shorter and lighter than the Americans. Their leotards were bright pink, glossy (in sharp contrast to the monotone stars and stripes pattern Monica and her teammates wore). They were little fairies, tiny creatures of folklore able to dance and twirl on the very breeze itself. Monica had met each of them beforehand, exchanged gifts (Linda's idea) during lunchtime. They were talented athletes, and friendly people—but they were also the enemy, and this was war. The political monster had sent forth its first wave of svelte pixies; Team USA was expected to defend and defeat.

Monica stretched, waiting her turn. Hades stood over her, listing various skills and sets under his breath as they were performed by the opposition. He took notes.

"We'll have to adjust your routine here...and here," he said, going over his beam ideas, rewriting Monica's skill combinations on the fly. "Can you do it?"

"Of course I can," she replied, glancing at Hades' laptop screen. "You *did* train me to be hot-swappable with my skills." Considering his training tactics, it made perfect sense that the idea was to be modular, dynamic instead of static. Final routine sheet not to be revealed until it was time to present it to the judging panel. It was total improvisation, more than the small adjustments necessary to deal with an injury or lack of confidence—and it wasn't just an American tradition. The Romanians were, from what Monica could see and hear, just as guilty. Routines that their girls had gushed about during lunch were tweaked, certain skills removed entirely, replaced, enhanced. Wild stuff, difficulty-wise. It was nothing like a junior-level competition.

"Well, duh," said Jackie when Monica mentioned her surprise. "This is how you do it at the international level. Didn't you know that?"

Insubordinate runt, Monica thought, not really meaning it. "Obviously I didn't."

Jackie put her hand on Monica's shoulder. "Don't be nervous. You're going to do fine. Just because you've never been a senior doesn't mean you don't have a senior's mentality in you."

"Thanks." Monica shrugged away, not minding the pep talk so much as she minded the nearby cameraman with his lens aimed directly at her. She hoped her parents weren't watching (though of course they probably were).

The time came for her first vault. The girl before her had earned an impressive score, as well as another in a steady stream of hearty ovations from the Romanian fans. Monica knew she was capable of what Hades wanted, but it was still a challenge maintaining her game state. It didn't help that Hades was frowning at her the way he always did whenever he sized her up—this time comparing her against the Romanian template: her face, with its broad features; her body, with its rugged, compact build; her style, with its minimalist flavorings.

Is it really so detrimental that I don't look and act exactly like one of the fairies? she wondered as she lined up for her approach. Jackie, Britney, Lena, Kristen, and

Autumn stood off to the side and mimed their forthcoming routines, looking and acting exactly as expected as the cameramen orbited around them. It seemed too obvious a mistake to make, especially for someone of Hades' caliber, but somehow he'd gotten it into his head that height and weight alone would propel his team to the topmost tier on Heroes' Day. Unless he was somehow being constricted by his superiors, bureaucrats and military men who didn't have an ounce of first-hand experience with the sport...but there she went again. Thinking too much. Overanalyzing. Brooding. Gloomy.

The portion of the audience focused on her (the men's teams were earning their own cheers at the other end of the arena) became hushed. The cameras poised themselves; the judges acknowledged her. She raised her arms, presented, then faced the vaulting table, let out a deep breath, and started down the lane. She picked up speed quickly, launching herself off the springboard and propelling herself up and over the vault, twisting impressively in the air, alighting on the mat, legs together, feet planted firmly.

The applause was deafening.

Piece of cake.

The rest of Team USA followed, working its way through vault, bars, beam, and floor while in between the coaches worked the score sheets, took turns conversing with undisclosed superiors via their cell phones. Making bets, Monica imagined. Taking bets. Matching fake-outs to fake-outs for an outcome that may or may not have been determined ahead of time as, after each rotation, the odds were rolled over. A Romanian fell during her beam routine, and suddenly Hades was whispering into Monica's ear, "D-plus set, easy on the E skills. Feign an ankle injury." (Meaning she was to execute an overall easier routine with the more complex skills as a garnish—as opposed to doing a difficult set with easier elements dispersed throughout. Evidently, she was to help keep the American team from overtaking the Romanians too soon.)

She nodded and, when it was her turn, mounted the beam, going through the motions as requested. On the dismount, she made sure to wobble slightly and apply noticeably less pressure on her left ankle. After presenting to the judges, she limped off the podium and into Hades' arms.

"A little shaky there," he said, play-acting for the cameras, doing what a coach was supposed to do when he knew he was being filmed. "What do you think happened?"

Nothing happened—my ankle never felt better! "I probably should have done what Stacie said, distributing more evenly between both legs."

"Well, we'll have to work on that. Come on, let's get you taped up."

Stacie stepped in, med kit in hand. She started wrapping Monica's healthy ankle. The camera crew lingered for a moment before following Hades to the next event, the next girl.

"You did very well," Stacie said. "Keep it up."

"You mean the successful fake-out?" Monica asked, "or my improvised conversation with Coach Hades afterward?"

"Both—now hustle. You're up for the floor exercise in a few minutes."

Monica acquiesced, making sure she kept her limp as she moved to the floor area.

The rest of the meet passed quickly, Monica's attention narrowing out of necessity as she focused on executing her own routines. The Romanians won the team competition, but the U.S. girls closed out the evening with a number of strong scores in the individual and apparatus finals. Monica was chosen as the all-around champion—a surprise, since she'd added up the scores in her head, and while the margins were close, Lena should have come out on top.

Needless to say, the girls (Lena in particular) were disappointed—and not without cause, for their routines had been dumbed down, their roles underplayed. The brunt of the media's attention had been directed at Monica, Jackie, and Britney; the other girls were merely support.

The cameras followed the teams as they organized themselves for the award ceremony, during which the athletes congratulated each other with hugs, kisses, handshakes. In the background the final scores were announced over the P.A. system to thundering applause. Monica stood on the winner's platform with her bouquet and her medals and her plaque, and she smiled her stage smile even though she was feeling a bit like a con artist.

Lena fudged beside her, muttering under her breath, "Do those scores sound right to you?"

On the Romanian platform, one of the men was making it as difficult as possible for his coach to get him onto the third-place tier.

So this is it, Monica thought. *The world of the elites. Temper tantrums, flashy cameras, fake routines, and skewered scoring.*

All the way to Heroes' Day.

Chapter 32

"*Whether you love them, hate them, or simply can't remember their names, the six super-petite acrobats comprising this year's U.S. women's gymnastics team have launched themselves into the competitive season with a considerable showing at yesterday's Incept Cup—good news for the Dow Jones, up 3% after a week of incremental losses. While the Romanians walked away with the team title, newcomer Monica Sardinia, despite a nagging ankle injury, captured the all-around title and aided in earning the United States its first batch of credits for the new year. Here with me is Melissa Gardner, sports editor for* Patriot Monthly.*"*

"*Good morning.*"

"*We're about to shift from the current, less-than-glamorous Olympic term and into entirely new territory. 'Uncertain' is a word many analysts have used to describe the nation's economic future with regards to our national rank. Your thoughts?*"

"*It's anyone's guess at this point. As you stated, we're rapidly exhausting our current term and heading into a new one without the bravado that we had as a nation during the lead-up to Heroes' Day, 2084. The NPAA's new team format may have shock value, but it's going to take a concerted effort to make it through the long haul. This much was evident during the Incept Conference, where our girls showed their abilities as individual athletes. However, there wasn't that team presence you need in order to boost overall morale early on. Patriot-elite women's gymnastics remains one of the most popular spectator sports around the world. That means the fans are watching, waiting. It's important that the team, and not just its members, succeeds in winning over the public trust.*"

"*Let's talk star power for a moment. We seem to have a new twist on an old design. You have the obvious icons, Jackie Davisson and Britney Lawler, both of whom had strong showings at a variety of national conferences last year, and both of whom managed to draw large crowds to the meets. Then you have the newcomer, Monica Sardinia, a virtual unknown turned fan-favorite as she walked away from the Incept meet with the all-around title.*"

"*Yes indeed. Monica's a little powerhouse, originally dropped into the roster to*

serve as background support. But her performance last night has made it clear: she's not settling for a behind-the-scenes role. Now, it's unlikely that this will be the final Heroes' Day lineup, but with any luck Monica will be the exception. I think we'll see as the season continues that she's a dedicated worker, a competitor. Her training partners call her Gloomy because of her no-nonsense attitude in the gym —she makes you earn those smiles, but when you do, it's worth it. She knows what's happening around her, and she knows how to react. Darren Hades is up to something with her as his team captain."

"*Her appointment to the Patriot team* was *rather unorthodox."*

"*Wasn't it? She skipped past the standard recruitment process, going from small-town Wisconsin girl living in her aunt's basement to national superstar overnight. Even so, that doesn't mean the alternates aren't still waiting in the wings for the opportunity to step in. The Patriot program may have turned VIP-only here in the States, but that just means those senior national positions are all the more coveted..."*

Sitting poolside with a stack of photographs and a permanent marker, Monica let her attention tune in and out of the sportscast emanating from Linda's boom box. She hoped no one had heard the part about her living in Aunt Deborah's basement. It was going to take some getting used to, this business of having people talk about her as if they knew her or the girls or Hades on a face-to-face basis. That and other things.

She glanced over at Stacie, sitting fully-clothed at one of the tables and going over her notes. In the pool, the girls (all but Jackie, who was sunning herself on one of the loungers) quietly splashed each other. Hades sat alone in the jacuzzi, brooding, looking more homesick than Alana that first night on Olympus—hardly the genius mastermind the media folks made him out to be. Every now and then one of the cameras (there were *always* cameras) swooped in for a candid shot. No one seemed to be feeling the moment. Monica herself didn't feel like the all-around champion she was alleged to be. At the junior national meets, you always ran into fans in the stands, on the sidelines, on the way to the bathroom, in the parking lot. Apparently, this wasn't applicable for full-on Patriot elites, shielded by several layers of security men and women. Not a single spectator slipped through the cracks; Monica had to make do with autographing her stack of a hundred glossy photos, watching the team lounge around the swimming pool in silent merriment and wondering if there'd ever been a time in her life when things had felt so anti-climactic.

Jackie came over after a while, her bronzed skin glistening in the sunlight and making her look all the blonder.

"So. You're a star," she said, and sat cross-legged on the concrete.

"Does that bother you?" Monica asked.

"I don't know. Should it?"

"I was supposed to be the background support. You and Britney were the specialists. You told me so the day we first met."

"Oh, that." Jackie waved her hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. Darren explained everything to me. It's cool."

"The others don't seem too overjoyed."

"Let them mope. They'll adjust."

"What did Coach Hades explain?"

"It's complicated. I don't want to burden you with it. Is it true, by the way? What they said on the radio—were you really living in your aunt's basement?"

"Not by choice."

"That's pretty messed up. I could never live in someone's basement."

Monica attempted a smile. "We do what we have to do." She wanted to tell Jackie to keep quiet about the whole deal, but considering that the information was already all over the airwaves, there wasn't much of a point.

"Anyway, I was talking to Darren earlier," Jackie said.

"And?"

"He wants us in bed early."

"How come?"

"Linda has us booked on the Leroy Chase show tomorrow."

Monica made a distasteful face. Leroy Chase was a talk show host. He had all the big stars on. Monica never understood any of the jokes, but her parents seemed to enjoy tuning in every few nights. "Doesn't he come on late-night?"

"Yeah, but I guess they do the actual filming in the early afternoon."

"Oh. That makes sense." Monica settled back in her lounger, scooted her legs under the shade of the umbrella. Momentarily a scuffle erupted over by the other end of the pool area—a man in a jogging suit was being frisked by Tompkins and one of his brutes.

"Everybody wants a piece," Jackie muttered.

"You think he's a photographer for one of those gossip magazines?"

"More likely a pervert with a Web site," said Britney, climbing out of the pool and toweling dry. "They never learn. I mean, come on. It's not okay for a strange man to come on to you when you're just a normal, average teenage girl—why would it be okay if you're a Patriot?"

"You ever get an e-mail from one of them?" asked Jackie.

"No, thank goodness," replied Monica.

"Lucky you. They either want to paint a nude portrait of you or take 'art photos' or write a book about you, but for some reason they can only do it if you spend the night with them at their *summer home*."

"For research purposes, no doubt," Monica laughed.

"For our *country*." Britney stuck out her tongue as she watched Tompkins' man lead the jogging suit intruder away. "Good thing we only have to put up with it for a few more years before we're replaced by the next batch of cuties."

"Then it's only the *regular* perverts we have to worry about."

Wrapping her towel around her midsection, Britney tapped Jackie's shoulder

and pointed toward the east entrance. “Come with me to the vending machine. I feel like a snack.”

“Okedokes.” Jackie got up, followed Britney. “But we need to bring one of the guards.”

Indeed, Kim, having noticed their general direction, was on his way over.

The girls glowered at each other.

Britney said, “Geez. We’re old enough to work for the government, but we still can’t buy our own sodas without adult supervision!”

Monica watched them go, stretching in her chair.

She wondered how John was doing.

Chapter 33

Leroy was shorter than Monica expected, but no less animated in real life than on-screen. Pouncing on his cue, he took the stage by storm, basking in the lights, the cameras, the audience whooping and clapping and screaming his name as he shook hands with those standing at the foot of the stage.

After the fanfare had died down: "Good evening, everyone, and welcome to *Prime Time, with Leroy Chase*. I am Leroy Chase, for those of you wondering why a British prime minister is hosting an American talk show."

The audience chuckled, for while there was some resemblance, it was only remotely possible that Britain's prime minister himself would ever moonlight on Leroy's show.

"A fascinating front-page statistic for you," he continued, picking an imaginary piece of lint from the arm of his suit jacket. "What's lower than the U.S. national rank? Take a guess. Anyone?" He paused briefly, held up his hand after a few uppity audience members shouted out answers. "Hed Larsen's sperm count, apparently."

More laughter.

"I guess the press is giving him a hard time because he and his wife were recently spotted at a sperm bank—I'm sorry, *fertility clinic* is the politically correct term, right? Whatever. Here we are on the verge of a new Olympic term, the competitive season underway, and what's making headlines around the world? Hed Larsen's batting average!"

Again, laughter. The applause sign blinked furiously.

"Now, I understand it's a team thing. I'm sure anyone worth their salt would want to know their various male celebrities can out-lay the competition should conceiving become an Olympic sport—but aren't there more important things we should be focusing on at the moment? Analysts say the U.S. national rank is at its lowest point since the Global Ranking System was put into place. Coincidentally, the number of felons put to death last year was the *highest* in two decades. I say this is a missed opportunity. Why not kill two birds with one stone and make electrocution an Olympic sport?"

In the green room, where Monica and her teammates waited for their interview, a large video screen relayed Leroy's monologue in hi-def.

"I don't get any of his jokes," Kristen said, wrinkling her nose.

"It's what you call potty humor," Stacie muttered under her breath. She stood slightly apart from Hades, her warm-up suit (she was to serve as assistant coach during the interview) the antithesis to his jeans and partially-unbuttoned silk shirt,

which offered a tantalizing glimpse of his well-defined chest.

"Not a fan of Leroy's work?" asked Hades, playful, keenly aware that he was being watched by the studio intern who would escort them on-stage when the time was right.

Stacie shook her head. "Not my cup of tea."

More like, "I think he's a foul-mouthed slob," Monica thought, reading Stacie's expression and wondering if now wouldn't be a good time to practice her social fake-outs.

Linda: "Just remember that there's no such thing as bad publicity. The more your girls are seen and heard, the more the American public will care whether or not they make it to Heroes' Day."

Stacie gave her a dirty look.

Meanwhile, Leroy worked his way through the monologue, ending with a jab at a popular actress' tendency to marry the wrong guy. There was a minute or two of quiet waiting before the intern touched his headset, nodded, and gestured for Team USA to follow him to the stage area, where a balance beam had been set up. On cue, each of the girls took a turn tumbling across the beam in her own unique style as the band played an upbeat tune. Leroy shook hands with the team members, directed them to the sofa, where they sat all lined up in a row, their leotards sparkling under the studio lights, the faux-city skyline glowing in the background.

Motioning for Monica to sit in his lap, Hades took the chair closest to Leroy's desk, and was the subject of much attention from the female members of the audience.

"Wow!" Leroy exclaimed, motioning for the applause to ebb. "I bet you could grate a block of cheese on those abs—yours are nice too, Darren."

Monica laughed along with everyone else.

"Amazing stuff! How many hours a day do you have to train to keep that figure in business?"

Monica felt a nudge from Hades, heard him whisper, "Stand, smile—do a quick turn for the cameras."

Monica did as she was told, standing, smiling, turning.

Hades narrated: "The girls start practice in the morning, have lunch at noon, school for a few hours, and then they hit the gym again until early evening."

Leroy counted on his fingers. "That's...that's six, seven, eight hours a day?"

"It depends."

"God, man! You don't think all that work's stunting their growth?" Leroy nodded at Monica. "How tall are you?"

"Five feet," replied Monica.

"And you're the *biggest* of the group!" Leroy chuckled, looked into the nearest camera. "I feel like we're hosting a Hobbit harem."

Monica sat back down, not sure what a Hobbit was. Or a harem. At the far end of the sofa, Stacie was looking murderous.

"Now, I know you and your staff are trained professionals," Leroy said,

addressing Hades, "but do you ever wonder if you might be pushing these girls too hard? I mean, all day inside in a gym—that's time they could be spending with their friends at the movies or the mall. They're world-class athletes, but how much can they possibly know of the real world?"

Hades took the question in stride. "I think they know a lot more than most kids do. It's popular to single out Patriot elites because they oftentimes involve boys and girls training from a very young age. But to be honest, nothing in this life comes easily. You have to work for what you want, and children raised with a healthy work ethic will have the advantage when they mature."

"Well, I can certainly agree with the principle, but when you're up close and personal with a gaggle of teenyboppers...I mean, it's just so *stark*, isn't it? What of childhood in these modern times?"

"They're young," said Hades, passing a glance at Monica and the others, "but they're also professionals. And if you do a little comparing among Patriot athletes you'll find gymnasts tend to have higher GPAs than many of their peers, and are often more well-adjusted in adulthood."

Leroy didn't look convinced. "Numbers and statistics are all fine and dandy, but is it right to place such enormous expectations on our children's shoulders, to drill them into perhaps expecting too much of themselves?"

"Look at it this way, Leroy." Hades coughed, cleared his throat. "If you're fifteen years old and all you're allowed to do after school is hang around at the movies or the mall, then you're just a minor in the adults' world. You're being kept out of the way. You can't drive, you can't vote, you can't earn your own money. You spend your childhood and teenage years sheltered, coddled until suddenly on your eighteenth birthday you're flung out into the wild and expected to adjust overnight. If you're a Patriot, you've acquired the skills you need along the way. You've been a contributing member of society all along, so it's no shock to be out of school or on your own. You wouldn't send a parachuter out the door without first giving him the proper training, right?"

Leroy chuckled. "That depends—are we talking about my son-in-law?"

The audience roared.

Monica heard Lena say, "That's terrible!"

"But enough with the philosophical debate." Leroy addressed Monica now. "Monica, dear. You look lovely tonight."

Monica blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Chase."

"Now, you're the team captain, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Give me the dirt, then."

Monica shrugged, looking quickly at Hades for guidance. "Dirt?"

"Gossip. The nitty-gritty. In pro basketball, for example, there's a lot of trash-talking courtside, or behind the scenes. You run into an opponent at a bar and you're psyching him out before the big game. Gymnastics seems like such a pristine, disciplined sport, everyone so prim and proper—you don't even break a sweat when you're out there doing your thing!"

"Oh, we sweat," Monica laughed.

"How about trash talk? Do you ever stand on the sidelines and yell out, oh, I don't know, disparaging gymnastics insults?"

"To be honest, no. I mean, we might talk or joke about a silly move or ugly leo beforehand, but when you're out there on the competition floor, you're really only thinking of what you're going to do when it's your turn. And you're always keeping limber, stretching—our coaches keep us busy."

Leroy nodded at Hades. "It's true you and Darren don't get along, isn't it?"

Monica looked at Hades a moment; he was smiling cautiously. "We manage," she said, hoping she came off as casual.

Applause.

"But," pressed Leroy, "there are probably some days where you just want to tell Darren to shut up and do his own tricks, right?"

Monica shot Hades a nervous smile. "We sometimes knock heads."

"How so?"

"Well, for example, I have this thing I do on my floor exercises, a sort of back *head*spring. It's easy enough to do on a podium surface, but one day I'm putting together a routine on the balance beam, and Coach Hades comes up to me and says, 'You think you can throw one of your back headsprings in there?'"

Leroy shook his head, smiling wistfully as the studio was filled with laughter. "Darren, my man, are you trying to kill the girl?"

Hades shrugged, put his hands on Monica's shoulder and massaged a little too vigorously. "She's thick-headed—I assumed her skull could take a few knocks."

"All the way to the emergency room, no doubt."

"Ooooh!" cooed the audience.

"In all fairness," Hades said, "this is a great example of the kind of relationship a coach has with his athletes. If an athlete simply takes orders without considering her own abilities, then that's detrimental, both in practice and in competition. Pep-talk aside, her experience should tell her whether or not to do it, whether she *can* do it at her current level of expertise."

Leroy nodded, accepting Hades' answer and shooting another question to Monica. In fact, the interview continued with nary an acknowledgment of the rest of the team unless they were somehow related to what was being asked of Monica —she'd inadvertently become the media favorite. First at the Incept Cup, and now on her first national talk show appearance. The attention was excruciating, and she soon found her smile wearing thin.

Things only got worse when Zoe Gaines came out. Zoe was an ex-gymnast, and had written a tell-all book, *They Took Away My Gold Medal Because I Got Chalk on My Butt*, which was currently enjoying a stay on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Her opinion (and she made it quite clear from the onset) was that elite gymnastics was garbage, elite coaches were delusional tyrants, and parents of elite athletes were utterly irresponsible in allowing their children to be exploited by the Patriot System. All this in the first five minutes of her interview, during which Monica felt Hades grow increasingly tense.

"I mentioned trash-talking earlier," said Leroy, flipping through his copy of Zoe's book. "This is pretty much *the* compendium of gymnastics trash talk. What do you think about ex-athletes signing book deals to slander the sport, Darren?"

"She has her point of view," Hades responded.

"And so do the thousands of others who've been broken by the system," said Zoe with a confrontational look at Hades.

"There are many reasons an athlete might let go of her elite status. Not everyone with NPAA membership is plotting to destroy young men and women's lives—"

"With all due respect, Mr. Hades, I've competed at the international level. I know the kind of dysfunctional relationship it takes to win a gold medal—"

"Do you, now?"

"—and I know what a coach really means when he tells one of his girls to do the best she can."

"What would that be?"

Behind his desk, Leroy shot Monica a helpless (but amused) glance as it became obvious he'd lost control of the conversation.

"They can't help that they're younger and smaller than you," said Zoe. "When a coach says, 'Okay, you don't have to do this skill if you don't want to,' he really means, 'Fine, be a quitter—give up your medal or certificate or credits or whatever.' There's a very subtle but potent message of disgrace if you don't rise to the occasion. A coach doesn't outright push anything on his athletes, he convinces his athletes to push themselves. Of *course* a gymnast is going to say she's fine with anything and everything that's expected of her. She doesn't want the ridicule, the stigma of failure."

Monica shrank in Hades' lap. The cameras were hovering close now, making her feel quite exposed. She wanted to slip over to the sofa, but didn't dare budge for fear it would allow Hades to run amok, tearing apart the stage with his bare hands.

Facing Leroy again, Zoe said, "That's just the behind-the-scenes drama. It's a whole separate issue when you're actually performing. Personally, I would never let my teenage daughter parade herself around in front of a stadium full of strangers, whether or not it's the patriotic thing to do. Aside from the overemphasis on body image, the pressure of performing in front of such a large audience is just ridiculous. You've got an army of living, breathing people watching you—to say nothing of the extended audience tuning in via camera and satellite linkup. Every mistake is magnified tenfold."

"So, what, then?" asked Leroy. "Do we abolish the Patriot System? Keep our children locked safely indoors at all times?"

"I have no problem with the Patriot System," said Zoe. "Nor do I think it's necessary to stifle our children's desires to contribute to the national rank in their own way. There are many ways to gain elite status, ways that don't require the total abolition of one's social life, ways that don't involve the exploitation of a girl's every curve, every crevice." She gestured at Monica, who shrank even further in a

desperate attempt to make herself disappear altogether.

Somehow Hades held himself together. He fielded a few more pokes and jabs from Zoe before it was time for her to go, time for the musical act to begin its number. Midway through the song, Team USA made its exit, Linda (bending to a plea from Hades) feigning a tight schedule.

Outside, as Tompkins and his entourage guided the girls into their shuttle, Monica overheard Hades growling at Stacie: "A total circus. All of it."

"Darren, calm down—"

"Nothing's changed in sixteen years. A tramp like Zoe wants to be a Hero, but doesn't want to pay for it. No wonder she got knocked up, dropped out of the sport, and started writing sensationalist books for a living."

Monica's jaw dropped. Sure, she knew Hades was a tyrant, a sexy, screaming, ranting, raving lunatic who liked to throw things during practice—but he never talked smack. Not like this.

"Come on, sweetie," said Linda, giving Monica a gentle push. "Into the shuttle."

"What's with Coach Hades?" Lena asked as she settled into her seat.

Monica thought, *Leroy Chase did to him in half an hour what we couldn't do in two months.*

She said, "I don't think he likes Mr. Chase."

Chapter 34

The Leroy Chase interview stuck with Monica for several days, and for all the wrong reasons. Points had been made, feathers ruffled—the whole ordeal had left a bitter aftertaste. Hades insisted that he'd been unaffected by Zoe's animosity, but Monica knew that wasn't true. He spoke less than usual during training, and almost never yelled—which was actually less satisfying than the norm, because Monica knew he was keeping everything bottled in. He was wounded; it was only a matter of time before there was a backlash, the result of which would undoubtedly include more reps during warm-ups, longer training hours, a new resolve to keep the girls lean, mean, ready for world domination.

But that was for later. In the meantime there were other worries demanding Monica's attention. Since the start of the season, she and the girls had been living and training at the National Training Center in California, and though the place was quite literally a gigantic ranch within walking distance of an achingly quaint tourist town, there wasn't much time for browsing the gift shops or hiking along the wooded trails.

In mid-January, the International Patriots' Festival was held in Dubai. Like the Incept Conference, there were protesters, reporters, cameras, fans (as seen from a distance), fake-outs, and tantrums. Unlike the Incept meet, Monica was ready for the superficiality of her role as a member of the U.S. Patriot team. Superficial athletics, genuine theatrics—if that was how it was done, then that was how it was done. She followed Hades' lead, earned her credits (and probably provided material for Zoe Gaines' next book along the way), and no matter how embarrassing it was knowing her friends and family had seen her squirming like an ant under a magnifying glass during the Chase interview, she kept her smile.

Britney didn't share the sentiment. During the preliminaries (the Festival was a two-day conference), she botched a vault landing, and the deduction was just enough that Jackie and Lena were advanced to the finals without her (only two members from each country were allowed, and Monica, tied with Lena, had been instructed to take a fall during her beam routine).

"I should have learned the fake-outs," Britney murmured during the all-around finals as Tompkins' men guided her (Monica, Kristen, Autumn, and Linda, too) into a plush skybox.

"It wouldn't have made a difference," Monica said, setting her bag down. "I didn't make it to finals either." She glanced around the room, which was quite accommodating, but which suffered from a lack of decent snacks on the refreshment table. There was also a camera bot present. As soon as it spotted

Monica, it whizzed over, focused its lens on her face. She felt like flicking it off. "We shouldn't be talking about that anyway."

Throwing herself onto one of the overstuffed sofas, Britney said, "With you it's intentional to slip or fall. I didn't make it because as hard as I tried, I still fu—"

Linda glanced her way, eyes wide.

"—*messed* up my landing."

Monica giggled softly. "Pretty little gymnasts aren't supposed to swear."

With a devil-may-care wave of her hand, Britney reached for her phone and earbuds. "I don't care. Don't talk to me anymore."

Monica scowled, took a seat and stretched her legs out. One of the dozen video screens came to life and aimed itself at her as soon as her backside had settled into the pressure-sensitive cushion. A subtle holo-menu appeared within arm's reach, offering channel and volume controls.

"That's why you're his new favorite, you know," said Kristen, sitting beside her with a small bowl of grapes balanced between her knees. "Because you do whatever he says."

"I'm supposed to," Monica responded. She peered over her shoulder to make sure Linda—and the camera—was out of range. "He's my coach."

Britney snorted. "You probably do the same thing when you're alone with John. *Whatever he says*."

"Let's talk about something else," Monica snapped, and wondered what percentage of the team assumed she was letting John have his way with her between assignments.

"Don't mind her," said Kristen. "It's the cabin fever talking."

"Right. *Cabin fever*." Britney rolled her eyes and swiped furiously through her playlist.

"And I didn't mean anything either. It just seems like Coach Hades has trouble with anyone who isn't in total agreement with him all the time."

"Total agreement? Are you *kidding*?" Monica laughed. "Do you know how many times I've gotten into an argument with him? You'd need a scorecard to keep track!"

"That's why Autumn over here is the perfect athlete," said Britney. "That's why she'll make it to Heroes' Day after the rest of us have become day-old bread."

Autumn had been peering through the window; now she walked over to where the others were lounging. She sat cross-legged on the floor. "You're worried because of a single bad vault, Brit. There'll be others. Not all will be bad."

"And not all will be good."

"True, but—"

"Jackie was right. Darren isn't delivering on his promises. The season is going to suck."

"It may or may not. Look at it this way: even if it does suck, being on the national team is the high point of your life."

Britney looked horrified. "This *is* my life!"

"Yeah," agreed Monica. "Or is becoming a Hero a side-project for you,

Autumn?"

"It's a phase, nothing more. You'll either succeed or fail, and after you there'll be another girl to take your place, and after her there'll be another, and another. In the meantime, you will have moved on. High school, your first car, your first boyfriend, your first job—a husband, kids, a house in the suburbs, maybe."

"How incredibly boring," yawned Britney.

Kristen asked, "How do you know so much, Autumn?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Um...like, not really," said Britney.

"Everything's predetermined. That's how I know."

"Ugh." Britney rolled her eyes. "Not the conspiracy theory speech again!"

Autumn faced Monica and Kristen. "It's not a conspiracy, it's part of the program. See, when nanomedicine became the standard, the legitimacy of competitive athletics went right out the window. It's all done at the microscopic level, so who's to say whether or not you've been taking a performance-enhancing drug, or whether you've had some musculoskeletal work done? Who's to say what's fair and what's not?"

In the background, on the video screen, Jackie was preparing for her floor routine. Monica should have been watching and cheering her on, but instead she turned the volume down and scooted closer to Autumn.

("You girls aren't going to watch?" Linda chirped.)

"That's why they screen you before every competition," Kristen pointed out. "To make sure you're playing fair."

"True, but the technology is changing all the time. The cheaters find new methods of hiding illegal enhancements. There's no foolproof way to make sure an athlete's body isn't augmented, or that she hasn't been bred with artificial enhancements—like that triathlon girl who'd been born with specific, custom-made genetics. Her parents had planned her gold medals before she was even conceived!"

"The feds caught her, though," said Monica.

"Yeah—twenty years after those initial consultations with the geneticist."

"Your point?" sighed Britney.

"My point," said Autumn, "is that we have to compete in other ways—namely subtleties and slight-of-hand. Even a team made up of 100% organic girls would be suspect if they raked in too many consecutive wins. We have to make it look genuine. Like it was a hundred years ago. We pretend we all have the same goal, which we do, but it's in a roundabout way. It's *expected* that Monica is probably faking some of her falls, or maybe Jackie some of hers. Whether or not it's true doesn't matter; it's the theatrics the judges are after. The most convincing performance, and not necessarily the best routine, is what gets rewarded. That's why Monica's here instead of down on the competition floor. She should have made the finals yesterday, no sweat."

Monica said, "Can we please stop using me as an example to prove a point?"

Autumn glanced over her shoulder, saw the camera hovering nearby. In a

subdued voice, she said, "I'm sorry—but you know better than anyone else what's going on when you and Coach Hades are practicing alone in the gym after-hours... don't you?"

"I do," Monica replied, looking away. She knew—of course she knew—but it was sobering to hear it put into words. "You want me to give back my medals, have them replaced with Oscars?"

"Oh, I'm not saying it's wrong or anything," Autumn said. "I guess it's just interesting to have first-hand experience regarding the things me and the girls back home used to gossip about. I'm surprised you all are taking it so seriously when you know what's going on."

At that moment, Linda came over and wagged her finger at the group. "Now, now, ladies. It's unpatriotic to be gossiping in hushed tones when your fellow teammates are down there competing for their country. Let's give them our undivided attention for the duration of the meet, okay?"

"Yes, Ms. Baimbridge," Monica said, and raised the video screen volume.

"Boy," whispered Kristen. "She can be pretty annoying when she wants to be."

Monica nodded, fixing her gaze on the screen. "And when she doesn't want to be, too."

On-screen, the news coverage shifted from event to event, from country to country. When it was time for Jackie to perform, the camera hovering above Monica started streaming live footage of her reactions to Jackie's various tumbling passes. This was only marginally embarrassing until John (who'd evidently qualified the previous evening) got his moment in the limelight—at which point Monica instinctively swatted at the camera as she tried to hide an involuntary blush.

"Wow," said Autumn, who'd only ever seen John from across the Olympus training room. "Your boyfriend is hot, Monica."

"And how," added Kristen with a mischievous grin.

"I've never seen Spandex look so good on a guy."

Monica pretended not to hear. She watched John nail his routine on the parallel bars, after which he presented and jogged off the podium. His father gave him a hearty pat on the back; his teammates high-fived him—but still there was a profound look of grimness and fatigue on his face.

Mind's somewhere else completely, isn't it? Monica thought, a twinge of sadness making her frown. *Oh, John. I wish I could be there with you. I'd help you find your smile.*

Chapter 35

The day of the banquet didn't feel at all like the sort of day in which one might find enchantment or romance. For starters, Linda decreed that it would be "absolutely smashing!" for Monica, her teammates, and a film crew to wander about Dubai in a fusion of half-hearted tourism and genuine media overindulgence. "We simply *must* get some shots for the photo album!" was Linda's battle cry, though exactly which photo album she was referring to, Monica hadn't a clue.

The weather was chilly; the cameramen were nothing less than invasive; Britney's sanity, already trampled on by the results of the IPF meet, was hanging by a thread. Nevertheless, the girls performed their teamly duties, posing in front of every single landmark, buying out every last clothing and jewelry store, and even managing an hour at the beach in their bikinis. Monica couldn't imagine how much everything had cost, and she definitely hadn't the slightest clue where she was going to store all her purchases once she was aboard Olympus again.

On the way back to the hotel, the shuttle broke down. This pushed back their schedule by half an hour, so that while Linda phoned for a limo, the girls hurriedly took turns showering and changing into their dresses and gowns. Monica shimmied into a one-piece shoulderless that didn't want to fit right. She would have liked an extra five minutes to make adjustments, but she'd barely had enough time to properly prepare herself as it was. The result: an armpit-wedgie and a slight toe jam—and an ominous outlook.

"This will be a *fine* evening, ladies," Linda reassured in transit. "Darren and Brenda are *so* looking forward to showing you off!"

Monica looked through the window with tired eyes. Everything outside passed by quickly, the details a blur. Eventually they melted into the iconic façade of the Burj Al Arab, a luxury hotel standing just off the Jumeirah coast. Guests—athletes, coaches, military and executive men and women—milled about the ballroom, some sitting and enjoying appetizers, others mingling with wine glasses in hand.

Monica sat with her teammates, shared punch and sandwiches, and smiled prettily whenever a press hound came by for a candid shot. Like any other public event, the girls were allowed to get their own refreshments and to go to the bathroom, but whenever Linda spotted one of them talking to a non-NAU athlete for more than a minute, she came bouncing over, asking what was being "jabbered" about, snapping pictures, acting out her delightfully annoying routine —covering for Hades and Stacie until they arrived.

An hour in, Hades and Stacie—the former looking like a well-coiffed

Hollywood star, the latter dressed in her usual conservative manner—made an appearance. Hades had brought a respectable-looking middle-aged couple with him.

"Monica here," he said, introducing the couple as Henry and Janice, "she picks up new skills like most girls pick up pop jingles. Would you believe she was doing backflips and cartwheels for lunch money back in Wisconsin?"

Janice covered her mouth, quiet shock distorting her features.

Monica squirmed, alarmed to no end that Hades was doing his part to help spread word of her ghetto days.

"A true all-American darling," said Henry, and raised his glass. "And a damn fine officer. I salute you, Ms. Sardinia."

Monica bowed her head humbly. "Thank you, sir."

Stacie seated herself at the table as Hades led Henry and Janice away.

"Who were they?" asked Monica.

"Big business," Stacie replied. "Mr. and Mrs. Bates. A pair of your sponsors."

"I have sponsors?"

"Of course, silly!" said Linda, cutting in. She snapped Stacie's picture. "All of you do."

Stacie narrowed her eyes, looking like she wanted to tell Linda to stop smiling so damned much. Luckily, another sponsor stepped up to the table just then.

Of course, thought Monica, shaking the man's hand. *Sponsors. People with money. People with expectations.*

The banquet dragged on. Sponsors and well-wishers came and went. Linda took pictures while Stacie kept a vigil on her wristwatch. In the background, Hades made the rounds, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries with everyone and everything, and, at regular intervals, picking one or two of his girls to accompany him for show-off time.

"Okay," said Lena after Jackie had been led away to dimple at a table of Texas tycoons. "Worst floor routine you've seen so far this season. Anybody?"

Kristen laughed, tapped Monica's hand. "Tell her about the space girl."

Monica dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "Well, I don't know about *bad*, but there was a German girl at the Festival who choreographed her whole routine to a spacey Berlin School mix."

"Oh, yeah!" said Lena, laughing. "She was the one in the metallic-silver leo who did all the robot moves, right?"

"How do you know the band is called Berlin School?" asked Britney.

"Because," said Monica, smiling at Linda, "when she took the floor, I specifically heard Ms. Baimbridge say, 'Berlin School? Mechanical nonsense!' So I looked it up online, and Berlin School isn't a band but a type of old—like, a-hundred-years-ago old—classical electronic music. Stuff computer geeks listen to."

"Scary," chuckled Autumn, shaking her head.

"My dears," said Linda, "gymnastics is all about aesthetics, the marriage of motion and music—and some musical genres simply do *not* translate well to the dance floor. Wouldn't you agree, Brenda?"

Stacie shrugged uncomfortably. “Some people will try anything—chew with your mouth closed, Lena.”

Jackie returned to the table. “I don’t see John,” she said as she took her seat. “I thought all the teams were invited.”

Monica caught herself in mid-yawn—she’d forgotten about John!

“I hear he took gold on the parallel bars yesterday.”

“Yeah, he did,” said Monica, finishing her punch and making an excuse out of getting up for more. She walked around for a little while, hopeful, looking for the Canadian men’s team. However, John and his companions were nowhere to be found. After several minutes of searching, she gave up and started back to the table.

Jackie caught her halfway there, just as a thundering dance beat filled the air.

“Dance competition!” she squealed, running past and joining the throng of partygoers helping to clear space at the center of the ballroom.

Linda took Monica by the arm and guided her along. “This will be *wonderful* for publicity!”

There was little use in protesting. Monica wasn’t in a dancing mood, but nevertheless she followed everyone else’s lead. There were many cute boys, many handsome men, many a flutter of Monica’s heart as, despite her lethargy, she danced herself dizzy, exchanging partners, keeping up with the changing tracks—

—and then there was John, who just so happened to be thrust forward during an unexpected moment when the music went from conquer-the-dance floor to sweetly-and-slowly-feel-your-guy-up.

Dean and several of the other Canadian boys were there too, and they waved, gave her multiple thumbs up. Monica acknowledged them with a bug-eyed nod. As a gymnast, she had, of course, a keen sense of balance and grace—but in this particular instance she suddenly felt her face flushing and her knees trembling as her new partner stepped in close, flashed her one of his heartwarming smiles, and placed his hand on her waist.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, huskily.

Monica nodded, noting how handsome he looked in his tux. She moved with him among the assembled couples. Some were jovial about the whole thing, slipping in showy athletic tricks between steps; Monica was merely shell-shocked, staring into her partner’s eyes as he seemed to float with her across the floor.

“You made it after all,” she whispered into his ear.

“Logistical problems,” he whispered back. “Try as he might, though, my father couldn’t keep us lost forever.”

“And here I thought you’d been avoiding me.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

They danced for a few minutes more. Then the music faded, the lights came up, and Monica found herself the subject of a good many gazes. John took a bow, allowing himself to be engulfed by his teammates, who were gleefully satisfied with the performance.

“Wow,” said Lena, appearing at her side. “That was *hot*!”

Across the way, Jackie crossed her arms and snorted disdainfully. She totally

looked her age—in a bad way.

After the music had picked up again, John came over with a pair of sodas, one of which he handed to Monica.

"I'll leave you two alone," Lena said, and winked. She joined the other girls on the dance floor.

"Why do I get the feeling that I'm being given preferential treatment?" Monica asked, noting that neither Stacie nor Linda made an effort to collect her.

"Well," said John, "you *are* the old girl."

"Absolutely over the hill." Monica stooped slightly and clutched her lower back in mock fatigue.

John took a swig from his soda can, put on a devious look. "Maybe my reputation precedes me."

"Maybe," Monica said, nodding toward one of the exits, "we should take advantage of the opportunity."

"You think you're allowed?"

"They left the guards down in the lobby."

"I'm game, then. Let's get lost."

It took a little exploring, but several floors down, they found an empty spa room with a magnificent view of the shoreline. Monica removed her sandals and padded barefoot to the window; John stood beside her and watched the city lights below.

"You've been busy," she said.

"Fighting for my country, yes." John sighed, chuckled. "It takes a month of practice for every minute of performance."

Monica faced him. Like herself, he'd become leaner over the months, his shoulders broader, his jawline sharper, neck muscles more pronounced. A whiff of his cologne and a dangerous excitement filled her.

"How about you?" he asked, facing her as well. "Are the States poised for world domination?"

"Yeah—in credit debt."

"Ah, I heard you went on a shopping spree. Must've been fun."

"It's given me cabin fever," Monica snorted. "And not just today, but every other day since the beginning. Somehow we've gone these past two, almost three months doing everything and going everywhere—but I don't feel like I've met anyone or...or *done* anything."

"You're racking up credits," said John. "You're appearing on the news, on fast-food wrappers. You're inspiring all the little girls back home."

"It feels so superficial, though. The only time I ever have fun is when I'm with you."

"Must be a coincidence or something."

"I mean it."

John smiled, pulling out his father's palm console. He aimed it at nighttime Dubai. "Night augmentation. You can see everything. Here."

He handed Monica the console. She adjusted the zoom, homing in on, as luck

would have it, a faraway scene depicting a shabbily-dressed elderly man picking through a garbage bin. She watched him for a moment as he cataloged that which was worthwhile, discarded what even he couldn't use. Further down the street, someone else was laying curled on a shop step.

"You're off in your own world again," said John.

"I'm thinking," Monica said, handing back the console, "of how we're up here on top of the world and everyone else is down there. All the food and drink and dancing, and down there someone's poking around for scraps. Someone's pacing the streets half-asleep because they can't find a nook to curl up in. And here we are, celebrating the fact that we're competing to muscle resources away from their government."

John rested his hand on her shoulder. "There are so many of us, and there's so little to go around. It's impossible not to pick sides. We have homeless people in Canada and America as well. There's nothing wrong with earning your countryfolk a chance."

"Except it's not so much chance, is it?" Monica murmured—though she caught herself in time. *Not supposed to tell anyone about the fake-outs, remember?*

"Until you actually get out there on the floor," said John, "you don't know what's going to happen. There are so many ways things can turn out—you'd go berserk trying to keep track of it all. So you focus only on what you can manage. For you, that's America. For me it's Canada. And Dubai has its champions, too. They'll take care of their own."

Monica reached up and grasped John's hand. She looked down into the city once more. "It just seems there are so many lights out there. You'd never notice if just a few blinked out. I don't feel a part of it. If I tried to take a walk down there the security team would stop me."

"Probably."

"It ticks me off."

"Your people are just taking care of you."

"I know, and it's stifling."

"Think of this," said John, now wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "Your parents wouldn't have let you come if they hadn't been promised every possible precaution. If you'd never come, then I wouldn't have met you. 'Monica Sardinia' would be nothing more than a name, a statistic in a roster I would never have seen—a distant point of light."

Monica smiled, fighting back the unpleasant thoughts that she didn't want to think at the moment. "Did I ever tell you my nickname?"

"Gloomy, right?"

"Who told you?"

"I looked you up on the Internet. Did you know you have more than thirty fan sites?"

"You're joking."

"Nope. I counted them myself."

"That's...weird."

"What, that you have thirty fan sites or that I counted each and every one of them?"

"Both," Monica said.

"You know, they're very thorough. They have all your stats—your height, weight, birth date, your favorite books and movies. They even have detailed lists of which leotards you wore at which competitions, and how you wore your hair—but none of them has ever mentioned your smile."

Monica indulged him, grinning ear to ear, for once not the least bit concerned that her mouth was too wide for her face.

John chuckled. "See? How could anyone with a smile like that be called *Gloomy*?"

"I've often wondered about that," laughed Monica. "I'm always thinking on the gloomy side of things. I try not to, but...well, I guess I'd rather go through this now, when I'm young. If I tough it out I'll have something for myself and my family later on. College money. A nice house. My parents won't have to struggle in their golden years—I won't have to struggle in my golden years."

"That won't be for decades and decades—now's what matters." John took her in his arms and kissed her affirmatively. He pulled back. "Isn't it?"

Yes, Monica thought, and kissed him back, taking the easier route, allowing the here and now to preoccupy her. She pulled him into an embrace and availed herself of him, modestly at first, then more aggressively, making up for weeks of restraint.

"Do you love me?" John asked several minutes in. He'd moved with her to one of the loungers; Monica's trembling hand traversed his chest.

"I do."

John looked flabbergasted, trying to squeeze the words out between kisses. Bold, brave, terrified—or perhaps just turned on. "Then...then I want to make tonight special."

A pause, removing lips from lips, receding slightly, pretending to catch her breath as the question hit her. *Oh, God. Just like when Pat asked to go steady—wait, no, not like that at all.* Pat hadn't been breathing so heavily, hadn't been so hot to the touch...hadn't asked to go all the way with her. She had to think. It was scary, the things John made her want to do. She'd never thought it possible that she'd want this so badly. Most frightening was that she was actually considering it. Gone were the days of STDs, unwanted pregnancies; she could do it with him right now, take a 24-hour contraceptive before bedtime—it would be so easy to give in to the fairy tale, to her own curiosities, to John's hands approaching intimate territory. There were probably a dozen other couples having at it in the bathrooms, the board rooms, private suites—but, then, they weren't seventeen years old, and Monica knew she wasn't exactly in the right state to be making choices like this. Maybe in a few years, when her Patriot days were behind her, when she could look back and clearly see that John was in it for the long run.

It was harder than anything she'd ever had to learn in the gym, but she let John go. "We should stop."

"Monica..." he whispered—

She covered his mouth, afraid that if he spoke even one more word or managed even one more kiss she would jump out of her dress and plaster herself all over him. "We need to stop. It...it wouldn't be right."

There was silence between them for a moment, John hovering close, so close, sighing, looking...relieved? "You're right. You're absolutely right."

Monica separated herself from him, took a handful of slow, steady breaths. She watched him button up his shirt, readjust his jacket.

"Geez," he muttered, laughing nervously. "What was I thinking? This is all wrong, isn't it? I must fit the sex-crazed teenage male demographic *perfectly*."

"I helped," Monica offered, and fixed her dress, smoothed her hair.

It took them a moment to cool off. Once they did, though, there was an unspoken release shared between them. Now, instead of groping each other desperately they merely held each other, reclining on the lounger and watching the city lights, listening to the bubbling water of the jacuzzi nearby. Monica wasn't all that disappointed about having missed out. In fact, she felt closer to John for *not* having made it with him. Oh, the thought was still immensely appealing—it was simply more appealing to let a quiet, intimate moment happen instead of forcing her first time, expecting kisses and contraceptives to take care of any guilt that may have ensued later.

"I still love you, by the way," she said. "Just in case you're one of those misguided boys who equates sex with love."

"In or out of that lovely dress," John said, "I think I'm stuck on you for life."

She popped a breath mint into her mouth, offered one to John. "What a typical teenage male thing to say."

"Sorry. Excess blood reentering the brain."

"*Eww...*"

John stifled another round of laughter, this time not so nervous. "We should get back before the adults send out a search party."

"Yeah."

The two of them stood, brushed each other off, and made their way back to the ballroom.

A Canadian gentleman caught them just inside.

"Good evening, Lieutenant Matusik."

"Good evening, sir."

"Minding the lovely lass here?"

"Yes, sir. Out for a breath of fresh air."

"Very good—keep that average up." The man smiled strangely, nodded, and went on his way.

John gave him a dirty look.

"Who was that?" asked Monica.

"A sponsor whom I've never liked—I'm sure you have them, too."

"Before tonight, I didn't even know I had sponsors."

"Really?" John shook his head. "Wow. They *do* keep you in the dark, don't they?"

Monica glanced around the room. Stacie was coming toward her and John at breakneck speed. Before Monica could react, she grabbed her by the arm and leaned in close.

"I know what you're up to," she whispered. "I know what you're up to and I think it's despicable—and if I had my way you'd be off the team so quickly your head would spin! And *you*!" She leered at John. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"What did I do?" Monica asked, rubbing her arm after Stacie had left.

John shrugged, bit his lip and looked the other way. "She saw us—in the spa room. I knew it. The two of us are finished."

"Tsk-tsk, you big lug," said Autumn (who, along with Jackie and Britney, had snuck up from behind). "Word of advice: don't use mints. It only makes it more obvious that you've been sucking face."

"*Thank you*," Monica replied dryly.

Autumn and the girls snickered together and walked away.

John grimaced.

"Geez," sighed Monica. "I hate parties."

Chapter 36

In retrospect, rain would have been more appropriate. Certainly clouds and thunder would have been far less misleading than clear blue sky and an optimistic outlook as Team USA attended their eleventh international conference of the year.

Monica felt great. She felt in control. The evening in the spa room with John had cleared her mind, lightened her conscience. She could have gone all the way with him, but didn't. She could have settled for the stereotypical outcome, but hadn't. She knew that neither teenage hormones nor self-doubt would be enough to bring her down before her time. Sure, she'd still had her moments, but she was making it through her term—eight conferences in two months—and with each meet, the stress had become easier to manage, an underlying ache lost among all the other aches and pains associated with being a Patriot athlete.

John...he was still nervous about something. Monica could only assume it was the increasing importance of his assignments, and the fact that his scores seemed to be gradually slipping. Often he was left out of the final rotations. Monica would spot him now and then at a mutual conference, sitting on the sidelines with his gym bag at his feet, sometimes watching his teammates compete, other times reading or listening to music. He never looked more than marginally disappointed, and never admitted to being more than a little tired.

Maybe it was a guy thing.

Regardless, Monica was fired up for the Onyx Cup, a corporate-sponsored conference designed to bolster OnyxWest shareholder morale. The opportunities for advancement were numerous, including individual, apparatus, and team standings. Security, of course, was all-out. However, Monica had grown accustomed to the presence of men carrying firearms, and so hadn't a clue that today there were perhaps more officers than usual, higher tensions than what was warranted for a not-quite world championship meet.

The rotations were molten, especially now that the early part of the season was out of the way, and the Olympic hopefuls had been replaced by the gold medalists. In the preliminary exercises, Monica was allowed to perform without any fake-outs, a necessary strategy considering the skill and temperament demonstrated by many of the NAU's opponents—namely China, whose girls seemed able to turn any situation into an advantage.

Hades reminded Monica of this early on. As such, her floor routine was heavy on the butt wiggles and pelvic thrusts, the winks and kisses—eye candy to accompany the goods. No, it wasn't her style; yes, it pleased the judges across the board and earned her a score that would almost certainly carry her into the finals.

As she prepared for the uneven bars:

"How hard can you make a giant look?" asked Hades.

"I can add a little hesitation on the rotation," Monica replied, adjusting her grips. "Maybe put a little uncertainty in there...though we never practiced fake-outs on the bars."

"I know." Hades looked thoughtful for a moment. "But I think we need a little improvisation."

"Is that what the voice on the other end of the phone line told you?"

"That's none of your business," Hades said.

"I'm only kidding—"

"Focus."

Monica frowned. *Lighten up,* she thought, and stepped beneath the high bar, oriented herself appropriately, tapping into the mind-body rhythm, feeling the bounce in the material beneath her feet, smelling the odor of sweat and chalk dust, tuning out the expectant silence coming from those watching her—

—and then *bam!* The flow was suddenly disrupted.

It was difficult to keep track of what was happening. One instant Monica was tensing up, hopping off the podium and reaching for the bar; the next Hades was diving toward her, clasping her around the waist, lifting, lunging, tearing her away as a cacophony of screams and shouts exploded all around.

"Gunfire!" he cried, and bore her to the floor.

Tompkins was there in an instant. With a small fleet of men surrounding her, Monica (along with Hades) was rushed off the podium and guided toward the nearest exit. She caught only glimpses here and there along the way: a stream of medics rushing in, a spattering of blood across one of the vault runways, an athlete laying flat on her back—then she was out, away, being directed through the corridors with Lena and Autumn haphazardly following along, asking what had happened.

"The competition is over," Monica breathed, panting, stumbling between nightmare and reality.

Someone had been shot.

* * *

Contrary to Monica's preliminary assumptions, she and her teammates weren't taken back to their hotel room, but were shuttled back to Olympus instead. There, they were allowed to quickly shower and change into their street clothes before being called into their quarters for an emergency meeting with Hades, Stacie, and Linda.

"Oh, my little darlings," said Linda, pacing. "How traumatic this must be for you!"

"But I didn't *see* anything," complained Kristen, as if she'd missed the good part in a movie.

"Yeah," piped Lena. "Does anyone know what happened?"

Monica started to explain what she'd seen, but Stacie cut her off.

"Someone—an athlete, yes—was injured, but the authorities need to look into it. They need us to do our job so they can do theirs. It's important that we don't trip any false alarms. Our responsibility is to prepare for the next meet, and not to spend our time spreading rumors, so please, don't talk about this with anyone."

Monica snuck a glance at Hades who, for the moment, looked nothing like the tyrannical super-foe she'd come to know during her time aboard Olympus. He stood leaning against the bulkhead, arms folded, face cheerless, eyes opaque. *He's more of a pawn than I am,* she thought. *Why didn't I see it before? He's about to burst into tears...*

Autumn raised her hand. "Can we at least call our parents to let them know we're all right?"

Linda nodded. "Of course, sweetie. Just remember: we don't want to upset them, we want to *reassure* them. Do you think you can handle that?"

The girls nodded their heads.

"Splendid." Linda stepped toward the door. "Now, if you ladies will follow me, there's a transport waiting."

Monica filed out of the room along with the others. Tompkins, Kim, and Cross were waiting at the stripe entrance. For once Monica didn't mind them being there.

In the promenade belt, the team found a suitable cafe. Linda ordered everyone tea and muffins; the guards waited near the entrance, nervous, edgy.

Monica parked herself at one of the terminals and dialed her parents, who looked immensely relieved to see her alive and well.

"Oh, Monica!" exclaimed Sharon. "Thank goodness! We were watching the news—we didn't know what to think!"

"What happened?" asked Mike. "We heard there was an explosion?"

Off-screen, Stacie looked at Monica warningly.

"I...I can't say right now," said Monica. She became aware of a tremor in her voice, and compensated by clearing her throat. "I mean...I don't know. They got us out of there so fast. I'm okay, though. All of us are. We're back on Olympus."

Sharon frowned, hugging Mike. "I don't like this. I want her home right now."

"Relax, hon," said Mike. "It's all right. Monica, is there anyone there we can talk to? Your coaches? An administrator?"

Nodding, Monica stepped away from the terminal, allowed Linda to take her place. She sipped her tea and watched with mild appreciation as her parents were expertly reassured that everything was under control, that Team USA was as safe as could be, ready for practice first thing tomorrow morning.

"Look at her wheel and deal."

Monica turned slightly, found that Lena was standing beside her.

"I never realized how dangerous this could be."

"Neither did I," said Monica.

"People hate us, don't they? They want to take away America's points. They want to kill us. I see why being here counts toward our military service. It's like

being on a battlefield."

Isn't it? Monica thought, knowing Lena had come to her, the team captain, for some kind of solace—but she had none to give. Moreover, it was taking considerable effort to keep her hands from shaking. "I'm sure it was an accident. Someone drunk, rowdy."

Lena looked doubtful. "But you said you saw someone get shot."

"I said..." Monica bit her lip. "That's what it looked like. I wasn't...I mean..." She swallowed. She wasn't sure what she'd seen or heard. Blood, an injured athlete, a loud bang that may or may not have been caused by gunfire. "I don't know."

Jackie came over.

"They're not talking," she said, and nodded at Tompkins' men. "They don't want to *upset* us. As if we're little kids!"

"Coach Stacie is nuts, then," said Lena. "She doesn't want us to talk about what we don't know!"

"And tomorrow morning," said Jackie, "we're just supposed to go to practice like nothing's happened!"

Kristen joined them. And after her, Autumn and Britney. They swapped conspiracy theories while Monica, hiding behind her cup, listened and formulated a couple of her own. After a few minutes, Linda called her back to her terminal.

"That Linda's very nice," said Sharon as Monica took her seat. "I'm glad she's with you and the girls."

"Yeah," said Monica. "She's...unique."

"Are you going to manage up there?"

"Sure."

Sharon frowned, still looking like she wanted her on the next shuttle home. "If you say so—but please call us as soon as you hear something, okay?"

"I will."

"Your father and I think it's commendable what you're doing for your country and your community. We love you, honey."

"I love you, too."

* * *

Hades gave the girls the rest of the afternoon off. While the others defaulted to painting their toenails or listening to music on their phones (and since John's team had yet to return to the station), Monica made use of her time doing research. Sitting in the lounge, she used her laptop to search for news bits regarding the Onyx Cup incident. To her surprise, there was very little information available—which was suspicious considering the number of camera crews that had been present.

Did Hades and Stacie get to everyone? she wondered. *Or did I imagine it as worse than it really was? Unless they're all in this together. Not willing—not* allowed *—to broadcast the truth.* If there was a truth to begin with. So far, it was only the fans who were feeding the buzz. Monica couldn't join any of the chat rooms, but

she *could* view the transcripts.

The one for #herofanz was interesting:

chalkdust_brat: I think it's a stunt.

dessertislander: You think that about everything.

chalkdust_brat: No, really, I do.

dessertislander: You think they killed an athlete for publicity?

chalkdust_brat: No, but that's what they want you to think. Get everyone riled up. Patriotic. I bet you lunch at Mickey D's tomorrow that big bad China gets the blame.

dessertislander: Why China?

chalkdust_brat: Because that's who we're at war with. We act all friendly with them in the spirit of the game, but the media doesn't want us to forget that they're trying to screw us over with outrageous manufacturing prices. A couple of Americans or American allies offed by Chinese radicals will certainly get the rest of us in an ass-kicking mood in time for Heroes' Day.

dessertislander: Why you gotta diss the sport by talking about evil politicians pushing buttons in smoke-filled rooms like that?

chalkdust_brat: It's true. Just look at that Sardinia girl. So obvious.

dessertislander: Don't you go bad-mouthing my little Monica, now.

chalkdust_brat: Watch her routines this season. Check her scores. Then check the world market conditions. Soy prices go one way, her scores are adjusted. Biofuel prices go another and she aces everything. They make it look as random as possible, but if you're careful you can spot the patterns.

dessertislander: That's like football or baseball. The endorsement whores. Gymnastics is about the presentation—not the enforcement. As much as the military tries, they can't spoil it for the rest of us. Monica knows that. You can see it in her routines. I have the sneaky feeling she doesn't just say "yes" to everything her coaches tell her.

chalkdust_brat: You're such a fanboy.

dessertislander: I'm conscious of my own healthy obsession, yes.

Monica read a few more lines, but the rest of the conversation devolved into a heated debate concerning which member of Team USA had the best butt. She wondered, though, if chalkdust_brat had a point, wondered if they'd noticed any of the in-meet phone calls or if they were aware of the whole notion of fake-outs. If there was a direct connection—

"Hey, Monica."

Monica looked up. John was standing over her. From the looks of him, he'd just stepped off the shuttle. "The NAU is calling all its teams back to Olympus. Something about a lock-down."

Shutting off her laptop, Monica left the couch and slipped into his arms. He kissed her on the forehead, smiled a moment. It was the most miserable smile she'd ever seen.

"What is it?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

"I...I don't know how to tell you this, but...I haven't been sleeping well, haven't eaten like I'm supposed to. I always feel sick."

"Oh, John..."

She moved with him to the far end of the lounge. They sat together, and John let it all out in hushed, earnest tones:

"Pheromones in my body spray. I never had to act the right way or say the right things. They told me I was guaranteed a spot on the national team. I...I was to distract you. They knew the States were investing in some 'special training' for one of their top girls. Once they figured out it was you, they told me I was to become your friend. I was, if you let me...I was to do other things as well. It would be a boon to us if the U.S. team captain was removed from the roster due to, say, an unfortunate accident or...or an unexpected pregnancy—I thought I was serving my community. Yellowknife is a frigid little town. My sponsors got desperate. They promised Gymnastics Canada that they had an athlete who would do the things all the others had refused to do. I went along with it because...because it was unreal to me. The Patriot world was a newscast fantasy. I didn't know any better. Now I do... and I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry, Monica..."

Eventually he ran out of steam and simply hung his head, sobbing softly.

Monica didn't know what to say. How were you supposed to respond when someone you loved told you to your face that he'd been trying to screw you over as part of an assignment? She recalled her first Sunday aboard Olympus, sitting up in the oak tree with John...how he'd reacted when she'd mentioned his being a secret weapon—she'd assumed his discomfort had been due to his wanting to ask her out, but now she realized it had been something else entirely.

When she could finally manage words, she quietly asked, "Would you have raped me?"

John's face became ashen. "No! Of course not! I mean, the sponsors, they always stressed the 'by any means possible' part, but I wouldn't have done it—"

"In the spa room," Monica interrupted. "That night of the party—if I hadn't

broken it off would you have gone all the way with me?"

John tried unsuccessfully to hold her hand. "I wouldn't have done it. Not...not for the reasons they wanted me to—"

Monica jerked out of her seat, stood on wobbly legs, felt herself shudder in disbelief that friendly, amiable John Matusik had orders to seek out, befriend, and *deflower* an opposing team member. Or worse. It was disgusting.

"Monica—"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. You've been hanging around with me as an assignment."

"I'd rather be disqualified forever." John stood and smiled wanly. "I'd rather die than hurt you."

There was a chill creeping up Monica's spine. Besides John and herself, the lounge was empty. Here, alone with this saboteur-boy, taller than she, with his gymnast's build—he could have his way with her right now if he wanted. He could beat her, leave her for dead. The security guards were sure to happen by, but what if they didn't come soon enough?

She started toward the exit.

John followed her. "Monica, please..."

"I have to think this over," she said.

She grabbed her laptop and ran from the room.

Chapter 37

Sleep didn't come easily that night. Monica spent the first hour in bed sobbing with her face pressed into her pillow (the other girls either didn't notice or didn't care, and so kept away). The second hour she merely lay on her back and stared at the ceiling as the tears dried on her cheeks. There were so many unanswered questions; her brain refused to allow her rest until she found some answers. But where to look? And what was she looking for?

She glanced at the alarm clock.

23:37.

She grabbed socks and sweatpants from her cubby, left her bunk.

Autumn stirred, cleared her throat. "Monica? Is that you?"

Monica cursed under her breath. "Go back to sleep."

"What are you doing?"

"I have to go to the bathroom. Go back to sleep."

Autumn mumbled something, half asleep, and rolled over onto her side.

Out in the corridor, Monica's socked feet made no noise against the floor. At first she headed toward the bathroom—but changed course when she heard familiar voices drifting out from the lounge area a few doors down. Upon reaching the entrance, she crouched and peeked inside. Hades and Stacie, both dressed down for the night, were seated at one of the tables and were talking—*talking*.

"What do you want me to say?" Stacie asked. "There's a threat, of course there is. Our people are dealing with it."

"There have always been threats," said Hades, "but this is the first time anyone's actually gotten hurt."

"People are always getting hurt. We're at war."

"You know what I mean. The whole point of Patriot athletics is to put a friendly face on the Global Ranking System—what happens when the casualties start appearing in our arenas and stadiums instead of out on the front lines?"

"You want to take them to task?" Stacie folded her arms. "Is that what you want to do? Spend the next ten years of your life in court spouting conspiracy theories at the NPAA—while in the meantime they've simply found another coach, another team to carry on right where we left off?"

Hades kneaded his temples. "I'm simply tired of the lies. If we win, we're screwed because we're reinforcing the stereotype. If we lose, we're screwed because it means the Patriot System doesn't work. Either way I'm supposed to shrug it off, wake up tomorrow morning and have practice with the girls as if everything's peachy—I can't. I *can't*, Brenda. That poor girl...it could just as easily have been

any of ours."

"We were told there would be a lottery. You do your time. We all do."

"I already did mine—sixteen years ago. Zor knew that, but he found a loophole anyway."

Stacie sighed wearily. "We shouldn't be talking about this. Our girls might hear."

"Let them hear," said Hades. "It won't make any difference in the end."

"Well, we're not at the end. We're in the middle. Have you been drinking?"

"You blow me away. You really do."

"I'm interested in completing my term and getting on with my life, nothing more. I do what I'm told."

"Then you'll be a Patriot until the day you die."

"Thanks for the sentiment."

"You're welcome," said Hades. "Look, I was an athlete. Now I'm a coach. I've seen both sides. We were young in my day, but they told us the truth when we signed on as Patriots. Today...these girls don't know any better. They think they're here to compete for gold medals, 'may the better athlete win' and all that fluff. The previous team at least had an ounce of experience. They knew it was a farce, and they had the gumption to walk away from it. My team, they haven't the slightest clue that missing a skill combination or bungling a landing sends ripples throughout the economy—in real-time. They have no idea the number of big business players who are trading score sheets like their kids trade baseball cards. Corporations are born, empires are laid to waste, and our girls think it's done in some far-off manner—Congress tallying up the number of gold medals we've earned on Heroes' Day and sending off a bill to China for goods and services due or something." Hades' voice wavered. "Lord, what Monica must think of me, teaching her to fake her mistakes. Her scores are good enough to do some really meaningful things for our country, but instead they have me teaching her to play dumb."

Stacie leaned back in her chair. "Again, I ask you: what do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know," said Hades. He stared at the tabletop for a moment. "Send Zor a message by not showing up for practice tomorrow morning?"

"What would be the point? Zor is a pencil-pusher. He follows orders like everyone else."

"Well, I have to do *something*. I can't see myself continuing like this much longer."

"You want my advice?" Stacie rose from her seat. "Get a good night's rest. Get through tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that."

Monica backed away from the lounge entrance, darted into the bathroom. She waited a few minutes before returning to her quarters and climbing back into bed, her heart pounding, her thoughts fluttering. Somehow it was reassuring to know Hades was going through the same emotional turmoil she was—not because he was suffering, but because it added validity to the whole thing. She now had a

reason to feel the way she'd been feeling all these months, and it wasn't merely because she couldn't get along with her superiors. She may have had her suspicions before, but the truth was now confirmed: there was something deep and dark going on in the world of Patriot athletics. There was a reason the NPAA had scrapped their entire team and replaced it with a group of unknowns. Team USA was supposed to be perfect, their coach a god among men able to work magic in the gym. Seasoned athletes would know too much—so the NPAA had wiped the slate entirely clean. They'd tried to erase their mistake—but therein was an even bigger mistake, an ignorance of the gradual corrosion eating away at the Patriot System's foundation. The world loved its sweethearts, and innocence was a potent weapon of war. Young, determined faces providing an analogy for the wants—a thriving pop culture, cheap electronics, readily-available fashion and beauty items—of an entire nation. The only problem was that as demand went up, and the legal competitive ages went down, the travesty became more and more obvious.

And I'm playing right along, Monica thought, bitter, disgusted with herself. All those years learning about the Patriot System in school, but not paying enough attention to really understand what it meant... *A girl with international experience would have been exposed to too many alternate forms of media. She'd know too much, she'd be too much to handle, but little old me, they knew I'd been circling America's cage for so long that I couldn't possibly have known the truth. And if I did, I'd be too desperate to care. I'd look the other way if it guaranteed me a spot on the national team.*

The clock read half past midnight. Monica's head was spinning. What had Hades said about her scores not being put to good use? And the lottery? What was *that* about? How could it have just as easily been her or her teammates who might have been injured at the Onyx Cup?

God, she thought, rolling onto her side and forcing her eyes closed. *I should have started eavesdropping months ago.*

Chapter 38

Morning practice had little to do with gymnastics. Though she worked on her skills (and helped the girls work on theirs, too), Monica's eyes were, at all times, on Hades and Stacie, looking for betrayed secrets, evidence of last night's conversation. Signs she might have been missing all along. There was nothing. Not a hint. These were your average, everyday coaches, tireless, unrelenting, never without a comment or critique—and meanwhile, the knot in Monica's stomach became so tight she was sure there was a giant invisible hand slowly squeezing the life out of her. Thankfully, Olympus' construction team had finished the Canadians' gym; she didn't have to bear training in the same room with John.

The girls thought she was merely in one of her trademark moods, and so gave her a wide berth—which was exactly what she didn't want: to be left alone as she stewed. But that's how it was with teammates who were younger than you. It wasn't in their nature to care about emotions that weren't their own.

Consequently, they were hardly paying any attention when, five minutes into lunchtime, she slipped out of the cafeteria and headed back to the home stripe. Cross accompanied her, solemn and silent. She entered the lounge, waved on one of the video screens. She lay on her favorite couch. She was tired, wired, feeling her strength pool in all the wrong places throughout her body—nervous energy with nowhere to go.

She wasn't aware she'd dozed off until the motion of someone sitting beside her caused her to jolt awake.

It was John.

"Oh, Monica," he said, smiling sadly. "You look like you haven't slept a wink."

Monica closed her eyes, pretending to be groggy.

"I know you hate me," John continued. "I know I'm a terrible person and there's nothing I can do or say to take back the bad things I've done. I just..." He paused a moment before resting his hand on Monica's calf. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"You've already apologized," whispered Monica.

"You know I'd never do anything to hurt you. Please believe me."

"Now you're being redundant."

"So I am. But you must believe me—I don't want us to end this way."

Christ, is he going to do this every freaking day? Monica wondered, caught between hatred and sympathy. She understood that John had been abused by the system, and that he was hurt, confused, undoubtedly waiting to be reprimanded for not living up to his superiors' expectations—but she was hurt, too.

Remembering that moment in the spa room, she knew she'd come *so* close to fulfilling his assignment for him.

She pushed him away, sitting up and tucking herself against the opposite end of the couch. How could he understand? Even if he was being sincere, she wasn't ready to take him back. It was too hard to tell what was meaningful and what was for show. Everything had been distorted. Her life, her career, her love; everything was a well-crafted lie.

"Monica—"

"Don't talk to me," Monica said, cutting him off. She turned away, facing the video screen. "Please, go."

John didn't say anything. The only sign of his leaving was the shifting of the couch cushion, the sound of footsteps receding from the room. Monica looked away from the screen only after she was sure he was gone. Cross was waiting patiently beside the entrance.

Enjoying the free show? she thought.

Cross continued to look straight ahead, eyes unblinking.

Monica watched him for a few minutes, not really looking *at* him, but rather using him as a backdrop as she pictured John in her mind's eye. He'd looked so miserable a moment ago. She had to wonder why—for her benefit? To placate her for the duration here aboard Olympus before he returned to Earth and sought out his *real* girlfriend, someone to whom he could apply his various charms without worrying about the Canadian gymnastics office's timetable? Or was he in love with her? Was he hurting as much as she was?

And what about me? Do I really not want to see him ever again?

There was too much going through her head. A short circuit was unavoidable—and, vast as it was, Olympus felt like a cage. Monica returned to her quarters and packed her bags. Then she sat at the edge of her bunk, waited until Stacie and the girls returned from lunch to pick up their school things.

"There you are," whispered Autumn, leaning in close as she reached for her laptop. "Coach Stacie's mad. Are you ready for class?"

"I'm not going," Monica responded, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Autumn backed away, joined Lena and Kristen on the other side of the room.

Stacie narrowed her eyes. After a moment, she said, "I need to talk to Monica alone. The rest of you will go directly to Mr. McDonald's room. Mr. Cross will escort you there."

The girls left quietly.

"All right," said Stacie, once the door slid shut. "What's the problem?"

"I want out," said Monica. "I can't take anymore. I'm through."

"You're giving up, just like that?"

"Don't pull any of that reverse psychology garbage."

"Watch your mouth, young lady—"

"And it's not *just like that*. I've been here since November. I've put up with the madness for long enough—too long."

"And school? Practice? Your obligation to your country?"

Monica stood, stamped her foot on the floor. “I want out of this madhouse, you hear? Out!”

Stacie moved toward her—and Monica, incredulous at her own automatic reactions, dodged out of the way, started hurling blankets, tossing pillows, knocking the computer monitor off the desk. Despite her petite frame, it took a stout effort on Stacie’s part to get her settled. She wriggled, pushed, shoved, and at last collapsed onto the floor, gripping her ankles and gritting her teeth.

“*Out*,” she rasped.

* * *

The infirmary walls were white and sterile. Monica lay on her cot and studied the details of an unexciting watercolor painting through heavy-lidded eyes. A nurse had given her something to help her relax.

All this time, she thought, *thinking it was the others who were emotionally unstable...and here I’m the one strung out on meds.*

In the next room, Hades, Stacie, Linda, and an Olympus doctor discussed the situation:

“What do we have?”

“Mental breakdown, no doubt caused by the stress of being an international competitor.”

“Yesterday’s fiasco wasn’t any help.”

“It was a catalyst, surely.”

“That’s it, then. We call her parents, send her home.”

“Now wait a minute...let’s consider our options—”

“What options? She tore her room apart.”

“It’s just stress. We’ve seen it before in athletes of this caliber. We’ll see it again. Everyone has their limits. The Onyx incident was hers. All she needs is time to recuperate emotionally. She’s a trooper.”

“But do we have the time?”

“We’ll *make* the time, damn it. We’ll do everything we can before the press gets wind.”

“The Band-Aid method. Don’t you think that’s gotten us in enough trouble already?”

“Look, Darren. It’s too late in the season to have another team member drop out. We have our alternates at the ready, but that’s not the point, is it? Losing our team captain would be a PR nightmare—we don’t need that.”

“Let’s take it a step at a time. We’re heading into spring break—we can cite an injury, something that would require some time planetside for therapy.”

“Where do you propose we send her?”

“I need to spend a week in San Francisco. I can put her up in one of the Patriot suites there. I’ll insist on guards and an adjoining room, of course.”

“What do we tell the rest of the team?”

“We’ll tell them what we usually tell them: bupkis.”

“Now, Darren—”
“They don’t need to know specifics. A family matter. Keep it simple.”
“Simple. That’ll be the day.”

Chapter 39

A "Patriot suite," though it may have sounded ritzy, was simply a pre-paid apartment or hotel for Patriot elites. Monica's was one of the nicer suites, offering room service, high-speed Internet access, and a terrific view of the bay. She was to spend the next week swimming, sunbathing, soaking in the spa, getting massages, going shopping, having her hair done, eating at fine restaurants—the works. Linda had the whole thing planned out, and though it was a good start, getting away from the grind and all, the context felt entirely wrong.

"When do we go back?" she asked on her first afternoon browsing the East Cedar mega mall.

"We just got here," replied Linda, spooning strawberry frozen yogurt into her mouth. "The entire afternoon awaits!" She savored her treat a moment, then clamped the spoon between her teeth as she reached for her camera.

Snap-snap.

God, help me, thought Monica. *A week being babysat by Linda Baimbridge—the plan must be to drive me back into Hades' arms by way of endless shopping sprees and chronic photographing.* "I was just thinking of the team. I hope I don't get too far behind in practice."

"My darling Monica, they're on their spring break, too. You won't miss a thing. This is *your* time, okay?" Linda checked her wristwatch. "Oh! We'd better get to the theater if we're going to make that one o'clock showing!"

Monica ran after her (the Olympus-appointed bodyguard—casually dressed for the outing—brought up the rear), appreciative of what she was trying to do, but painfully aware that the result was totally artificial. Her world was still being carefully guarded, her actions scripted, the plot points revealing only what was pleasant or pretty.

That was why, during a cheesy love scene, she took her backpack with her when she slipped out of the theater to use the restroom. The bodyguard followed, of course, and Monica smiled politely at him, promising that she would only be a minute.

She entered the ladies' room, which was conveniently empty. Immediately her avenue of escape presented itself in the form of an open casement window built into the rear wall. Too small for an average adult to squeeze through, it was just right for a tiny acrobat such as herself. Monica used a wastebasket for leverage, climbed up, peered outside. She was on the second floor, so there was something of a drop—though her main concern was being seen, as she would be exiting into an auxiliary entrance to the open-air portion of the mall. Still, it beat the alternative.

Her fear of heights not withstanding, she waited a moment until the coast was clear, then, trying not to pay too much attention to the ground below, she climbed out, nimbly made her way across the narrow ledge to a drainage pipe, which she used as a makeshift ladder all the way down. Once grounded, she did a quick 360° turn to make sure no one was watching.

Success!

She adjusted her backpack, calmly strolled off the lot. She hopped on one of the trolleys and went sight-seeing around the city—a *real* city, with the *real* sun up above, the *real* breeze in her hair. Monica remembered the breezes on Olympus as being unimpressive, products of a structured mini-world. Here, the elements mingled freely. Here was organic humanity, a bustling nerve center. The people passing her on the streets wore whatever they felt like, they gossiped, giggled, swore. Most who glanced her way did so in passing, as if she was merely an average teenage girl making her way home from school. There were a few double-takes, a few sparks of recognition, but no one approached her to ask if she knew she looked just like Monica Sardinia, that Patriot girl from the news. She was unexpectedly delighted by the relative anonymity afforded her.

Inevitably, though, she started to notice the patterns. Police passed at regular intervals, turning, trying not to look conspicuous—but Monica knew they were watching her. Not stopping her, but...watching. They knew who she was, they had her tag on their radar, but they'd been told not to interfere.

Or something like that.

As an experiment, she decided to try getting a room for the night—not that she had any intention of using it—or did she? It didn't matter, though. There was no way she'd succeed. But she had to give it a try.

She found a discount motel several blocks outside Chinatown. It was a dumpy-looking place with a stained sign hung out front.

She entered the lobby, strode up to the desk. "I'd like a room," she said.

The clerk, a red-haired man in his thirties, nodded and pulled out his reader. He scanned her tag. "Just you?"

"Just me."

"Not to pry or anything, but you look a tad younger than eighteen..." The clerk chuckled, trailed off as he examined Monica's information on his computer screen. Her Patriot status must have surprised him (or perhaps she'd been flagged), because he did a double-take, looking from his screen to her face and back to his screen again. Amazingly, he nodded after a moment and said, "My mistake, Ms. Sardinia. How long will you be staying with us?"

Monica thought fast—she hadn't expected such an easy consent. "Just the night, thanks." She leaned forward subtly, wondering exactly what was showing up in her file. Evidently the credit union hadn't placed a freeze on her account—unless the clerk was playing along until the police arrived.

He worked at his console a moment, then smiled at Monica. "Single bed, I assume?"

"Yes."

"Room 201, upstairs. Check out time is noon. If you need anything, give us a call. The number's been added to your contacts."

Monica thanked him and left the office. She passed the swimming pool, which was half empty and full of leaves. 201 was at the top of a rickety-looking flight of stairs. She waved her hand over the lock and let herself in. The room was small, and was furnished with a twin-sized bed, a small breakfast table, a TV. Everything was worn-looking, clean, but no doubt barely up to code—

—*real.*

She set her bag down and walked once around the room, testing the TV. Some people lived for years in a place like this. Check to check. *This is America. This is what I'm fighting for. Meager spaces for people of modest means.*

The bathroom was tucked away in a closet-sized compartment. There was no clothing recycler, no refrigerator. Monica hadn't thought of what she wanted for dinner, but reminded herself she would only be here for the night. If need be, she'd grab something from the vending machine.

She'd make do.

Chapter 40

Monica ate dinner—a deli sandwich she'd picked up at a nearby strip mall (along with laundry detergent, rubber gloves, overnight shorts and tee, and a few grooming items)—alone at the breakfast table. Afterward, she showered, washed her clothes and hung them to dry. Then she sat on the bed with her back against the headboard, her knees drawn up, and reveled in the strangely satisfying feeling of uncertainty. *This is how you're supposed to feel,* said a little voice in her head. *Not sheltered and protected and totally unaware of what's going on around you as you compete for a country you've never really seen—where's the patriotism in that?*

She thought of Hades and Stacie and the girls, and where they might be cooped up for their spring break, taking time out from work that was almost make-believe anyway. Photo shoots and fake-outs—she could do so much better! That's what Hades had meant during his midnight talk with Stacie: Monica (and other key athletes like her, no doubt) had the ability to earn the States some serious moola, but because of bureaucratic red tape she was playing it down, bringing in more moderate scores and keeping places like the Midnite Motel open even though it was more than a decade past its prime.

Getting out of bed, she went to the window and opened the curtain a crack so she could peer outside. There were three security guards pacing in the pool area. One of them was Lieutenant Kim.

So, they do *know where I am and what I'm doing.*

Monica put the curtain back in place. She returned to the bed, sitting cross-legged in the center and dumping out the contents of her backpack. The bracelet that Pat had given her tumbled into her lap—she didn't remember packing it, but it was a welcome find nonetheless. She fastened it around her wrist, watched as the letters spelled out a new message: RITE CHOICE COLA IS SUPERIOR TO SPARK! COLA IN EVERY WAY EXCEPT FLAVOR.

How typical, thought Monica, smiling, *of Pat to say something like that.* His expertise regarding off-brand colas was second to none. She wondered what he was doing right now. Gaming, probably. Possibly thinking about her. She'd known him all her life; they'd grown up together. There was comfort there. He wasn't perfect, more boy than hunk, but he'd never lied to her or used her for his own purposes. John...there'd been something there. Love, maybe. But duty, too. A sense of loyalty split between his girl and his country. He may have thought there was no other way when he'd taken on his special assignment—but if Pat had been offered the same opportunity, Monica was sure he wouldn't have taken it, and not just because of his anti-establishment upbringing.

It would have been nice to talk to him. Pulling out her phone, she brought up his name in her contact list. She hesitated, though, her thumb hovering over Pat's skater-punk avatar. Whether or not Tompkins' security team was monitoring her communications, she wasn't sure she wanted to explain her current circumstances until they were over and done with.

She closed the contact list, opened her browser and started surfing the Web in search of news about the Onyx accident. She didn't have to search for long, as the planetside newsfeeds were very different from those offered aboard Olympus. The world was *not* quiet and serene. Everyone knew the story and was propagating it: a British gymnast had been shot in the leg, and was currently undergoing regenerative therapy at UCLA. She was expected to make a full recovery in time for camp. No word on who was responsible, though there were hundreds of flame wars going on over which of the Patriot nations would most likely benefit from such a scheme.

Monica's name was hyperlinked in one such thread. Following the link, she found herself at one of the fan sites John had told her about. The stats section was impressive, containing every piece of information on her imaginable. At the bottom: a small, glowing box showcasing her military unit stationed overseas. The webmaster had included a group photo of the platoon hoisting her framed portrait above their heads—

—oh, wow.

Experiencing a sudden and abrupt clarification, Monica put down her phone. She now knew why joining the national team counted toward her military service: it *was* her military service. *That's why they made me a lieutenant. Not, merely, to give me clearance aboard Olympus, but because I'm a member of the United States military. I'm just not being deployed in the field.*

She lay back, wrapped the blanket tightly around herself. Outside, a car screeched to a halt. The driver swore loudly, then drove off. Nearby, someone was hacking their guts out. A block or two away: sirens.

Oh, to be back home, to be back with the Keenes and moping around my dilapidated little 'hood, where everyone but me supposedly gets the attention and appreciation they deserve.

How the ignorance had been bliss.

Chapter 41

The following morning, Monica woke to the sound of other people talking about her:

"*All it took was that first exhibition, and she was hooked. The NPAA has an outreach campaign to get children interested in the Patriot program. They sent a group of young acrobats to Monica's school touting gymnastics as a fine way to have fun and to serve your country. Monica was only seven years old, mind you, but she knew that that was what she wanted to do. We started looking for a gym for her, but everything was so expensive—and too far away. That's when we found the Keenes' club. It's a small local gym, but NPAA-accredited. And Gary was willing to work with us.*"

"*I remember when Monica first came in with her mother. She was the shiest little thing—all I could see was this tiny head peeking out from behind Mrs. Sardinia's leg, but we eventually coaxed her out into the open. She had muscles all over, though she had no prior experience whatsoever. I gave her and her mother a small series of basic exercises to work on over the next two weeks, just to see. They came back in half the time, and Monica had learned everything perfectly.*"

"*Why gymnastics? Simple. I wanted Monica to come home so tired that I could make dinner and do the laundry without her bouncing off the walls. My plan has, as of yet, proved unsuccessful.*"

Monica lowered the volume on the TV. Yawning, she left the bed, stretched, and lowered herself onto the floor. She was halfway through a set of push-ups before she realized what she was doing—and even then it didn't seem like an altogether unreasonable way to start the day. Laughing to herself, she continued with a series of bodyweight exercises. When she was finished, she showered and got dressed, and was deciding what she wanted for breakfast when someone knocked on the door.

It was John.

"Good morning," he said, looking nervous, surprised, his hands stuffed in his pockets. "How are you, Monica?"

"Fine," she replied, stepping out and locking the door. "I was just on my way to get something to eat." She glanced down into the pool area. A pair of men in identical leather jackets were sharing a smoke as they watched her. "Tell me you

weren't just bumming around the neighborhood and decided to drop by."

"Your people sent me. They said you, um, ran away."

Monica scowled, started walking. "I'm on my spring break, that's all."

"Sorry, I didn't mean—"

"I can't believe they sent *you*."

"Well...yeah. I wasn't sure it was a good idea, either."

"You seem to have a knack for expanding upon bad ideas."

John sighed, followed her down the stairs and out into the street (the undercover security men—Monica *hoped* they were undercover security men—tagged along a dozen paces behind, making sure to look as casual as possible). "I deserve that, I know."

Though it was on the tip of Monica's tongue to agree with him, she kept quiet, kept herself wrapped in an air of nonchalance.

"They wanted me to win you back. You know, for public relations purposes—it would look good on record to see Canada and the United States working together. I wanted to come here because I was worried about you. I still care about you."

"Don't waste your breath," said Monica. "This is about points and deductions. Nothing more."

"You don't believe that."

"Sure I do. Don't you? Isn't that why you went to Olympus in the first place?"

John looked hurt. "I have my duty and my conscience, and every moment is a new chance to excel or fail. I have to live with that, and with my decisions, flawed as they may be. God's idea of free will, I guess."

"Don't get religious on me," said Monica, turning a corner and spotting the strip mall a few blocks down.

"Actually, I'm agnostic."

"That explains a lot."

"Does it?" asked John.

"With no God, there's nothing holding you back from raping little girls for extra points."

"I don't rape little girls."

I know, thought Monica, surprised by her own bitterness.

"And I believe there's a God, but I don't think it's anything we can comprehend or understand. I believe there's a bigger picture here on Earth, too, but it's something only the corporate elite are allowed to understand. Most of us only *think* we know."

"Is that your rationale? You don't know any better, you're not allowed to understand how things work, so you just do what you're told, rack up those points for your country in any way possible?"

"That's not what I meant. I..." John shook his head, looking upset, but refusing to let himself get angry. "I'm not on the national team anymore."

Monica slowed her pace, looked at him for only the second or third time since his arrival on her doorstep. "When did that happen?"

"This morning. They woke me from bed with word that I had to come see you.

Once I told them I had no intention of doing their dirty work anymore, they no longer had any use for me." John laughed. "My dad thought I was crazy when I turned up at the gym in my street clothes. 'We can work on your scores!' he said—he doesn't know any better. He thinks everything I've done these past few months has been the result of teenage angst or hormones. They kept him out of the loop. I can never tell him any of this."

Monica felt like crying—her game state was being stretched dangerously thin. "How do I know you aren't regurgitating some speech your people gave you to memorize?"

"You don't," said John. "I knew you'd be wary on my way down, but I had to come anyway. They wanted me to tell you to go back to Olympus, that you're needed by your teammates and your country and all that." He sniffed, looked away. "I just couldn't stand thinking of you all alone here. I couldn't stand thinking it was my fault. I had to see you, even if it's the last time."

By now Monica had stopped walking altogether, and was facing John down, trying to read his face, his body language. He looked so tired, his cheeks puffy from lack of sleep and contrasting sharply with his sturdy frame. She wanted to believe in his vulnerability, but there was no way to tell for sure. He was a good actor, after all. He'd convinced her to hand over her heart, and had very nearly gotten her to do the same with her body. And afterward...he may or may not have gone on to Heroes' Day without her, may or may not have left her to manage the guilt on her own.

She stepped forward, wrapped her arms around him, friend to friend, no passion. She didn't have to say it, and she knew John didn't have to hear it: they were merely friends, now. Forgiveness...that was still in the works—but she didn't hate him.

"I'll be seeing you around," she said, and continued on her way, making sure to keep her face down-turned so no one would see her tears.

Chapter 42

Monica decided to stay a second night at the motel. She wasn't so much testing the NPAA's patience as she was adamant about getting through whatever it was she had to get through on her own. There was some comfort in the knowledge that she at least had the duration of her spring break before anyone actually knocked down her door and dragged her back to Olympus. She ate, she bathed, washed her clothes, watched TV, browsed the Internet. At long last she managed to fall asleep.

John was a ghost in her dreams. She was usually in the gym when he came to her. She would be stretching, conditioning, working on a routine, and suddenly John would be there with her on the podium, always patient, a supportive teammate to coax and coddle her and tell her everything was all right whenever she botched a skill.

She woke up in the middle of the night aching. One part mental yearning, two parts emotional disarray—the aftereffects of imagining ideals that could never be. She managed to settle herself back to sleep again, but this time when she dreamed of John he was cold and cruel, yelling or laughing cruelly each time she went down.

Waking with a start, she threw back the covers, got out of bed. It was early, just before dawn, but she refused to attempt sleep until she was reasonably assured her brain wasn't going to dwell on the morbid. She got dressed, then sat at the breakfast table with her laptop and, as had become her habit, went online. The NPAA had a special spring break mini-site up. Included were a blog and pictures of the women's gymnastics team posing on some beach in their bikinis. Hades looked ludicrously good in his neon-green Speedo. He looked rested, happy—*silly Gloomy! That's how he's supposed to look. All fun and games, eye candy for the fans. But notice how Autumn is looking away from the camera in this shot, as if she'd rather be anywhere else; see how Hades is smiling just a little too broadly with Jackie on his shoulder; don't forget that Coach Stacie is nowhere to be seen—*

A knock at the door.

Monica blinked, looking away from the computer screen, surprised that dawn had come and gone without her noticing. She got up and smoothed her hair, peeked out the window, and saw the last person on Earth she expected to be paying her a visit: Gary Keene.

She opened the door.

"Happy birthday," Gary said with a nod.

She bit her lip—she'd forgotten today was her birthday! "Does anyone know you're here?"

"If by that you mean do your friends and training partners back home have

some crazy idea that you've run off and locked yourself in a shabby motel for God knows how long, then no, your secret's safe with me. That Baimbridge woman is adamant about keeping the team's image immaculate. May I come in?"

Monica waved him inside. He had a boxed cheesecake with him, which he set on the table as he glanced around the room. "I figured there wouldn't be a refrigerator here, so I paid the extra credits for a self-cooling box."

"Thanks."

"So. Eighteen years old and sporting your very own bachelorette pad, eh?"

"Er, yeah," Monica replied, suddenly feeling silly, childish—she was glad Gary had come.

"How does it feel?"

"Well, it's just for spring break." She sat at the table with her hands folded in her lap. "I guess they told you what happened."

"Not at first," said Gary, sitting across from her. "But I got it out of them. Everyone's real hush-hush about the whole thing. They want to pretend nothing's wrong. And your coaches aren't talking to anyone. Typical bureaucratic technique."

"Nothing's changed, then."

"Ah, but something *has* changed. That's why you're here regardless of the fact that until this morning you were underage."

"There are guards outside. I'm sure my tag is being monitored as well."

Gary leaned forward. "Why do you think you're here?"

A girl was shot, Monica thought. *My boyfriend spent almost half a year lying to me. My coaches act like training Patriot elites is the last thing they'd ever want to do.* "I don't know."

"The program is in big trouble," said Gary. "Did you know this is a matter of national security?"

Monica shook her head.

"Oh, yes, kiddo. You're being monitored 24/7 for your safety, but the NPAA also wants to make sure you're not standing on street corners and handing out pamphlets documenting the shabby training practices going on aboard Olympus."

"How much trouble am I in?"

"You have some time yet," said Gary. "Mr. Zor has agreed to allow the coaches a chance at resolving the problem—but you're on the clock. In five days he gets to send a SWAT team down here, and if it comes to that, you won't be returning to the Olympus training room, you and your parents will be heading for a court martial. Breach of contract and all that."

Monica stared hard at the tabletop. "Okay. I get it. I'm in deep trouble."

"I'm simply laying out the facts. Physical and mental stress aside, you have to understand who you're dealing with. These are people who've invested decades in the Patriot way. The system has never been popular, and even though it's a mess behind the scenes, as long as they can make it *look* like it works, it works. They're going to do whatever it takes to prevent a repeat of last year's walkout."

"I wasn't going to hole up here forever."

Gary's features softened. He reached out and clasped her hand. "It's hard. I know. Being an elite is one thing, but being a *Patriot* elite...well, that's an entirely different kind of beast, isn't it?"

Monica nodded. She knew Gary was scolding her in his own way, but it was okay, because he wasn't yelling. He never yelled. "I didn't think it would be like this. I was expecting long practice hours and lengthy travel times, but not the deception. There are so many people depending on me for points I'm not allowed to give."

"We all have to come to terms with the reality sooner or later." Gary let go of her hand and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. "I once asked you if you knew why Keene's Gymnastics was still small potatoes."

"Yeah," said Monica. "I remember."

"We're one of a precious few old-style clubs where the training program is independently funded by the parents' fees, a few county grants and the like. We literally have to create something from nothing every season even though I've had enough cumulative talent to jump on the Patriot bandwagon for the last fifteen years. But as a parent it's only natural that you want to protect your children. I admit that as a coach I feel as if my athletes are my children. It's hard every time one of my girls makes the national team. I know that it's a marvelous accomplishment, and that her skills will do great things for her—but I also feel as if I'm betraying her, sending her out prepared, but still sending her *out*." Gary closed his eyes. "I'm afraid I've been doing my gymnasts a disservice by training them for a system I don't much like. And yet, the alternative is to do nothing at all. To wait and wonder and wish for what might have been."

This was a side of Gary Monica had never seen before. "So...you regret KG?" she asked.

Gary opened his eyes and smiled halfway. "Oh, my, no! I made my choice, and I'm sticking to it. It's just...in order to do something you love, you sometimes have to do things you don't."

"You think I should go back to Olympus, then. Finish my term."

"I think the choice is yours."

"I don't know if I can go back," said Monica. "It'd be selling out, giving in to the system. But if I cop out, I don't know if I can live always wondering what it might have been like to follow through, to make good on all the promises."

"I hear you," said Gary. "And I wish I could somehow make things easier, but you're not my daughter. And you're not a little girl. I can't make your decisions. I can, however, ask that we share a slice of this delightful-looking cheesecake before it walks right off the table."

Monica smiled. "You know what I like."

There were napkins and plastic eating utensils inside the box. While she held it steady, Gary set himself to cutting her a generous slice.

"Just a small piece," she told him.

"Come now, you're on your spring break!"

"Well...okay—just this once."

“Good girl.”

Chapter 43

Gary stayed for an hour or so, talking about old times, the gym, bits of news. When it was time for him to go, Monica hugged him tightly and very nearly started crying. Then he was gone, and she was alone, standing by the door and listening to the echoes of his voice in her mind.

Quietly, she gathered up her things and replaced them in her backpack. She put on her socks, her sneakers, her backpack; she retied the cheesecake box, and, hefting it under her arm, she exited the room.

She left Midnite behind and went for a walk, entering Chinatown and browsing the many stands of an open-air market, though she wasn't interested in buying anything. It was the lively backdrop she was after, motion and movement to hopefully kick-start her decision-making abilities. In fact, she was so deep in thought that she didn't realize she'd left the marketplace and turned a wrong corner until she was already halfway down a narrow alley segmented by a twenty-foot tall chain-link fence.

A dead end.

"You can't get through that way," said someone behind her.

Monica turned and headed back toward the alley entrance. Off to the right, a man who'd just exited from the back door of some store or restaurant was heaving a pair of garbage bags into one of the bins. He looked young, perhaps in his late twenties, though stress or a heavily burdened life had given him a permanent frazzled, agitated facial expression.

He reminded her of John.

"The owners were getting tired of people using the alley as a mini expressway," he said, doing a double-take, stepping toward her. "Oh, wow. You're Monica, right? Monica Sardinia? I've seen you on the news, you and the other Patriot girls. Holy crap, this is amazing! I'm Tyler."

Monica shook his hand hesitantly. Her bodyguards were nowhere to be seen—she'd inadvertently lost them in the marketplace.

"You have a gymnast's hands," Tyler said. "A soldier's set."

Monica looked past him, wondered just how closely she was being monitored by Tompkins' men, and how long it would take them to get to her should the need arise. Tyler had a hungry look in his eyes, maybe sexual, maybe not, but voracious nonetheless.

As if reading her thoughts, he smiled, stepped closer. "I'm not a pervert or anything. I'm a fan—I have a wife, two kids. My daughter's a gymnast—recreational. We can't afford the fees for the elite clubs, so we take her to the public

gym. They're nice there. Volunteers. Christians. My family and I saw you at the NCPA meet last year. It was awesome to hear you'd finally turned Patriot."

"Thank you," Monica said, inching her way toward the street, trying to be polite about it.

Tyler reached into his jacket pocket for something. Monica swallowed hard, braced herself for any manner of offensive items, from knives to guns to vials filled with noxious chemicals.

He pulled out a photograph.

Handing it to her, he said, "I want you to have this. It's me and my brother, just before he was shipped off to Africa last year. He tells me his platoon—the Sardinia Sharpshooters—have all your scores committed to memory. He's stationed along the Barrier. Rough times down there, keeping those pesky insurgents away from our crops. Because of you, though, they were able to upgrade the equipment at my brother's outpost. Response times during air raids have never been better."

Monica felt a lump in her throat. Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" asked Tyler, perplexed.

"I didn't know. I never would have...I didn't know how it all worked. I would have...I didn't know."

"You didn't know what?"

"The Patriot System. How we're all so tightly intertwined. I had no idea my scores meant so much."

Tyler looked genuinely confused. "But...you're Monica Sardinia—an *elite*. How could you not know what you were competing for?"

Monica couldn't answer, for not only did she not have an answer to give, she was, at that moment, assaulted by a barrage of police officers pouring into the alleyway. They swarmed around Tyler, hit him, threw him onto the ground. Monica shouted for them to stop, but her pleas were ignored as one of the officers grabbed her, whisked her right off her feet and carried her out into the street, to one of the squad cars. The officer must have thought she was struggling, because he kept telling her to settle down (really, she was merely trying to wriggle around so that she could see what was happening in the alley). With rough hands, he thrust her inside the car and closed the door.

Kim was waiting inside. He looked neither pleased nor displeased as he spoke into his headset. "We have Ms. Sardinia, sir."

"Is that Mr. Tompkins?" Monica asked, noting with some trepidation that her cheesecake box had become dented.

"Never mind that, Ms. Sardinia," said the officer riding in the front passenger seat. "Are you hurt? Injured in any way?"

"No, not at all. Tyler—that man in the alley—was just telling me about his family—"

The officer seemed not to hear her. "It's all right now. He won't bother you. You're safe here with us."

"But—"

"Please, buckle up."

"Where are we going?"

"The Heroes' Matrix," answered Kim.

* * *

Located in Sacramento's Global Tea Garden, the Heroes' Matrix was a towering monument listing the nation's Patriot elites, past and present. Listings were sectioned off into multiple tiers; the higher someone's rank, the farther up the pyramid their plaque was placed.

It was a light walk from the parking lot to the monument. Monica and Kim followed a winding path past several ponds and over various moon bridges. Upon arriving at the ground tier, Kim directed her to one of the air lifts.

"Say your name," he instructed as she stepped onto the platform, "followed by your rank and occupation. You'll be taken to the appropriate level."

"You're not coming?"

"No, ma'am." Kim stepped away.

Monica cleared her throat. "Monica Sardinia. Lieutenant Patriot. Gymnast."

The lift beeped and rose into the air, carried her a few tiers up, closer to the Matrix's base than to its apex, but higher up than she expected. She stepped along the walkway, skimming the listings (there were so many!) until she found her own, glowing inside its marbled alcove. Beside her name (and unhighlighted) were the names of her teammates, and, beneath, in alphabetical order, were the names and ranks of those directly associated with her scores.

It's like an extended family tree, she thought, and imagined a gruff-looking colonel sitting in the stands during one of her conferences, watching intently as she performed her routines. The moment she landed a difficult dismount, the colonel was on his cell phone, relaying which platoons in his company would be getting which allotments of much-needed funds—and if she didn't do so well, if she wobbled, bounced, stepped out of bounds, or fell...what then? Did he make the same call, albeit with a far less positive message? Did he get up and leave? Did he hold his head in his hands because he knew somewhere there were a few dozen men and women who would have to be overlooked when it came their turn at rations and supplies?

Monica felt a slight breeze as someone stepped beside her.

Hades.

Part of her was glad he was here. "What a mess," she said. "I'm really in deep, aren't I?"

Hades said, "The idea was simple: the NPAA was to have its athletes spend a year away from their friends and family, with limited planetside contact. Uninfluenced by the media or by peer pressure, an athlete would be primed to focus solely on her training. But you can't remove the human element. The struggling of the Patriot System for twenty long years should have made that clear. However, once these things get started, they tend to take a hell of a long time to lose momentum. And as civilized as we believe ourselves to be, all our social

refinements mean nothing if we don't have physical bodies in uniform to carry them out."

"I've been a fool," Monica murmured. "I blamed the NPAA for passing me by every chance they got, but I was just as ignorant as any other schoolgirl pretending she's paying attention in class. I wanted the glamor without understanding the consequences."

Hades rested his hand on her shoulder. "Same here. I wasn't much older than you. What did I know of the world besides what I'd read in textbooks and seen in the media? I left the sport after Heroes' Day, but it was too late. I'd become the poster boy of the Patriot System. That's what they're after: the image. I have no experience as a coach—you know that. Brenda is the one who does all the work. For me, every minute is another lie. But fate delivered us into these lives. If not here, than somewhere else, sick and starving, arguing, fighting with others over a puddle of muddy water. So, we wear shiny uniforms instead of grimy loincloths. We argue and fight over feedstocks and biofuel prices instead of small patches of dirt. We pretend to be purposeful human beings."

Facing Hades now, Monica asked, "Is that what I'm supposed to do? Pretend?"

"Call it a fake-out," Hades said. "Do whatever it takes to get through this. Finish your term."

"How does that fix things?"

"It doesn't. But, then, we were never invited to 'fix' things in the first place."

"We can make a difference—"

"As a *whole*," Hades interrupted. "Over time. One person can't do it overnight."

Monica shook her head. "You're wrong. A single person can be the...the..." She grasped for the right word. "...the catalyst."

Hades looked amused. "You think that person is you?"

Could be, Monica thought. *Look how everyone's going into conniptions over my taking a time-out.* She didn't tell Hades, though, because she knew it was a supremely self-righteous thing to say even if she didn't mean it in a self-righteous way.

Instead she asked, "What's the lottery?"

"The what?"

"The lottery. I heard you and Coach Stacie talking about it the other night in the lounge."

"You were eavesdropping?" Hades folded his arms and glowered.

"It's not like you were making an effort to keep your voice down—and you said you didn't care if anyone overheard."

"Yeah, well..." Hades looked away, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He chuckled nervously. "What the hell, right? The lottery is an agreement between Patriot nations to, um, ensure a certain amount of acceptable losses during the competitive season. That means fake-outs, forfeitures—"

"And athletes being shot," said Monica.

"That, too."

"Did that poor girl know what was in store for her?"

"I'm assuming it was choreographed beforehand."

"That's still awful."

"Yeah, well, every government has its trade secrets. What's important is that it looks real."

"That's why our underdog status is so important. That was our lottery draw, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Hades.

"Will it be like that on Heroes' Day?"

"I can't say."

"Tell me!" Monica exclaimed.

Hades gave her a look of warning. "I can't tell you because I don't know. The coaches aren't given their instructions until the day of the meet. Sometimes we don't know until the exercises have already begun. I'm sure you've seen me on my cell phone on more than one occasion."

"Oh." Monica's demeanor softened. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"It bothers me all right—but look at it this way: you can go up against the NPAA and the U.S. government, the United Nations, and whomever else is involved in the proliferation of the Patriot mentality, you can spend the next twenty years of your life in courtrooms and on news shows trying to sell your cause, and meanwhile you won't have time for anything else—or you can make your little contribution on Heroes' Day, go home, and live your life. As ordinary and unspectacular as you may think it is, it's *yours*."

"What about the girls who come after me?" Monica asked quietly. "Don't they deserve to know the truth?"

Hades' patience appeared to have run out. "Look, Monica. I'm tired. I want to go home. I have a wife and two sons waiting for me. I don't need to live my life as a superhero. Neither do you. You're a fantastic athlete, but you've got to get a hold of your emotions. The NPAA is willing to forget about your running away—"

"I didn't *run away*, I just—"

"—if you complete your term with the Patriot team. You'll go home a Hero, with money for college, a nice house for you and your parents, a big, fat, shimmering entry on your resumé. Now...there's a shuttle waiting. What's it going to be?"

* * *

The door swished open. Monica stepped through and set her bag down. At the center of the practice area, the girls were doing modified push-ups. There was a noticeable silence as everyone gradually became aware of her presence. In a moment they simply stood, watching and waiting, pointing and whispering, "It's Monica! She's back!"

Stacie crossed the mat, came to stand before her. She frowned, searching her face and eyes for something—and when she found it, she nodded. "I trust your

spring break was restful?"

"Yes, Coach Stacie," Monica replied.

"Good. Suit up and start your laps. Then we work on your beam routine." She returned to the group. No emotional response, no indication that she was the least bit relieved to see Monica again—but that's how it had always been.

The difference now was that they both knew better.

Chapter 44

Although the media trumped it up as an amazing feat of strength and perseverance, it was no surprise to Monica that Jackie, Britney, Lena, Kristen, Autumn, and herself made it to Heroes' Day. When the qualifying world teams were announced in late July, she calmly and quietly accepted her role in the farce, acting neither too detached nor too gleeful, particularly during interviews. Her time away during spring break, as well as the months of intense training thereafter, had lulled her into a mode of acceptance and helped her develop a steady patience as she worked to fulfill her term, to get it past.

Physically, she was in the best shape of her life. There was a self-assurance in her grip, a certainty to her step—the promise that she was now tempered and toned and able to execute any of her skills or combinations with complete ease. All that was left was the defining moment in which to prove herself.

The fans started arriving on Olympus shortly before the Heroes' Day festivities began. By the time Day One commenced, there was no hotel left unbooked, no restaurant or cafe not filled to capacity. Everyone in Monica's home stripe gathered in the lounge to watch the opening ceremonies. On the screen, legions of contortionists clad in Spandex, face paint, and bearing colorful ribbons and batons, orchestrated with their bodies what a hundred-strong symphony wrought in a series of spectacular movements. Upon the climax, the celebrity runner, an Austrian track and field star (and former Hero), carried the Olympic flame up the grand staircase and set the cauldron ablaze. Everyone in the room (on-screen as well) cheered so loudly Monica was sure her hearing was permanently damaged.

On the eve of the gymnastics events, the Sardinias arrived. With Stacie's permission, Monica left the cafeteria during lunch to pay her family a brief visit in the promenade belt. She met them in the lobby of their hotel.

Chris was all smiles as he launched himself into her arms. "Wow!" he cried. "Look how long your hair is!"

"And look how spiky yours is!" Monica laughed, stooped to kiss his cheek.

He scowled and ducked away.

Mike and Sharon stepped in and exchanged hugs with her.

"It's been too long," Monica said.

"Sure has," said Mike.

"Isn't this amazing?" Sharon asked. "Can you believe the NPAA is putting us up for the duration of the competition? I can't wait to visit the rest of the promenade—it's absolutely gigantic!"

"Yup," said Monica.

"You *know* I'm going to take 1,001 pictures. Heck, *2,001*!"

"You're acting like a tourist, dear," said Mike.

Chris tugged on Monica's arm. "When are you gonna come see the new house?"

"After Heroes' Day."

"You're going to love it!" Sharon assured her. "I think you'll like Milwaukee, too. Chris' school is really good. Nice teachers, and they got new computers this year."

Monica smiled and generally tried to look as enthusiastic as possible. She'd forgotten about the new house, the new town, and was suddenly doubtful about the idea of leaving Sussex behind. *Was our old neighborhood so decrepit that the NPAA refused to find us a house there? Or is it just cooler to be a Patriot from Milwaukee than from Sussex?*

Her parents sat with her and talked for the remainder of the hour. She didn't really listen; their unabashed enthusiasm was enviable, but it wasn't hers to share. She was relieved when it was time to go.

Sharon hugged her again. "See you tomorrow, then. During the preliminaries?"

"Sure thing. Tomorrow."

"Good luck, sweetheart. We'll be cheering you on."

Chapter 45

Hades was arguing with someone over the phone:

"Damn it, they're Patriots, and they've been working their asses off since November! No...no, I'm not saying that. I understand, but regardless, I—yes...yes, sir." He put his cell phone away and looked at the girls. "*Well*."

One word said it all.

Still, Monica asked, "What's wrong?"

The lounge was noisy; a dozen teams were waiting for their transports to take them to the Olympic Arena. Monica had been taking photos with her teammates, but now she followed Hades out into the corridor.

He leaned in close, said, "We're going to miss Heroes' Day. Commander Zor wants us to bow out today with an accident on the balance beam. I'm sorry."

"But...but how come—"

"I don't know." He looked bitter. "Some corporation struck a deal somewhere or something. These things happen."

"Not on Heroes' Day!"

"Let them have their travesty, Monica. In a few days we'll be out of here. We won't have to put up with this crap anymore."

Crestfallen, she peered into the lounge. The girls were posing for another picture. They'd been so cheerful all morning, waking without complaint, collecting their things and hitting the showers. Stacie had met them back at their quarters, and had brought with her the new leotards, which sported a surprisingly robust blend of red, white, and blue—a break from the usual silver-and-white motif. Everything had looked so promising.

This sucks! Monica thought, the misgivings that she'd carefully suppressed since April now flaring with a vengeance.

"The others should know," she said.

"They'll find out soon enough." Hades shook his head. "It's a damned shame."

"But *why*?"

"I told you, I don't know—but if this is how we get out of it, if this is how America finally lets go of its twenty-year economic experiment, then so be it. I'm game."

Tompkins approached from down the corridor. "Your transport is waiting, sir."

Hades thanked him. He said to Monica, "Let's get this over with."

* * *

As the team rode to the Olympic Arena, Hades took notes on his phone and discussed his game plan. The girls listened, widening their eyes when he got to the part about Monica taking a serious fall on the balance beam. They'd obviously tallied up the conservative difficulty values in their heads and come to the conclusion that their overall placement would more than likely be somewhere outside the winners' circle.

In other words, the United States would not advance past the team-qualifying round.

"We're not even going to *try* to win?" snorted Jackie.

We were never supposed to win, Monica thought. *You should have known that when Coach Hades tried to teach you the fake-outs.*

"We're going to *try*," replied Hades. "However, just because the outcome isn't likely to be in our favor doesn't mean you can give anything less than 110%."

"Let me keep the extra twist in my beam dismount, then," pleaded Jackie. "That would raise my base score enough to—"

Hades held up his hand. "We've been given our orders."

The other girls (all but Autumn, who wore an almost smug "I told you so" look on her face) complained in silence, their expressions conveying disappointment and confusion—even Stacie looked bummed out, which was no small feat considering she never looked *anything*.

They reached the arena, Monica, Jackie, Britney, Lena, Kristen, and Autumn filing into the locker room, making room for themselves among the other athletes. The hum of an excited and expectant crowd could be heard echoing down the corridors.

Jackie approached Monica after spending several minutes in a huddle with the rest of the team.

"What do you think of Coach Hades' instructions?" she asked.

"They're lame," said Monica.

"I agree. What do you think we should do?"

"I'm going to do what's expected of me."

"Are you sure?"

"What else can I do?"

"We could...you know, do the *unexpected*."

The thought had occurred to Monica, though she'd hate to have to compete on Day Two enduring not only Hades' wrath but Zor's (and whomever else had ordained America's downfall) as well. And the legal repercussions...perhaps Hades was right. Perhaps it was time for the States to bow out. "Honestly, at this point, I don't think I want to stay around for the whole four days anyway."

"That might be your feeling," said Jackie in a distasteful manner, "but it's not ours."

"Oh, so you're speaking for the whole group now?"

"Well, we certainly don't look at it the same way as you. I know *I* want a medal. Several would be nice."

Monica nibbled on a fingernail. "You'll only get in trouble if you deviate from

the plan."

"Like you haven't gotten in trouble a dozen times since coming to Olympus, being disagreeable with the media people, giving Darren a hard time in the training room, sleeping with John."

"I didn't sleep with him," Monica clarified.

"Oh, come on. You two spent all your free time necking in the lounge. You could barely keep your hands off him—"

"We broke up."

"Oh." Jackie blinked, a moment's uncertainty crossing her face. "I didn't know that."

"There's a lot you don't know."

With that, Monica stepped away, waited alone for the team's cue call. When it came, she lined up with the girls, met Hades, Stacie, and their posse of security guards and cameramen out in the corridor. There were dubious looks all around, but, as with their previous meets, when it was time for the march-in, Team USA was a picture of prosperity.

From afar, the athletes shone in proud formation, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Romania, Great Britain—the best of the best, tried and true, small and petite, sleek and muscular. Everything was orchestrated with painstaking care, music, lighting, and stage cues synchronized against a backdrop of boisterous fanfare welling and ebbing with the formal introductions of the teams.

Monica felt ridiculous as she stripped off her warm-up suit and stretched, preparing for her first exercise. The girls ahead of her knew their stuff, and executed their routines with daunting accuracy. Surely the fans would notice the drop in the U.S. team's sportsmanship; surely they would wonder where her missing skills had gone—but when she stepped onto the podium, lined up, waited for the judges to signal her, anything untoward fell away like an unnecessary skin, an extra layer of clothing. It had to. Else her rhythm would not have been so steady, her posture not so straight, her grip not so firm. She nailed her bars routine, much to the American fans' delight. No doubt they assumed she was just getting warmed up, saving the best for last.

If only they knew this is as good as it's going to get, she thought, hopping into Hades' arms and, for the sake of the cameras, pretending to be pleased with herself.

Despite Jackie's righteous attitude in the locker room, neither she nor her teammates did anything unexpected during their exercises. Kristen suffered some slight hesitation on one of her flyovers, and Britney bounced a tad out of bounds during one of her tumbling passes, but there really wasn't any genuine excitement until it came time for Monica's beam routine, which had been arranged at the end of the rotation. That's when the ardent looks on the girls' faces quadrupled in intensity. *You can nudge us over,* they read. *You can earn us the points we need.*

"Go, Monica, go!" they shouted in unison.

It would be so easy, she thought, betraying not a single emotion as she listened to Hades' last-minute instructions. She'd cataloged the other teams' mistakes, and she knew she had enough of the advanced skills in her to keep the U.S. in the running.

They'd be at the bottom of the rankings, right at the cutoff point, but they'd advance to Day Two. *It's almost as if they're egging us on, daring us to step over the line!* And maybe they were. Maybe one of their moles had discovered the Americans' plan of losing to win, and were improvising, making it harder.

She waited for the judges to give her the go-ahead. To her right, she spotted Stacie and the girls standing together—half of them had their fingers in their mouths; Stacie was biting her lip. These weren't meet jitters, it was fear, dread, silent prayers being expedited: *Please, God, don't let Monica screw us over.*

It was ludicrous. Her athlete's temperament told her to do her best. Her training—her *orders*—mandated that she deviate from her natural programming. She was torn between opposite instincts.

One of the judges signaled her. She breathed deeply, sprinted toward the beam, mounted, oriented herself with a few alluring dance elements. She executed her first tumbling pass. *I'm going to be sick,* she thought, though her motions were fluid and self-assured as her sturdy legs carried her across the beam. She pivoted, rotating several times, going into a scale.

You can do this, she thought without thinking, and performed an impressive aerial, losing sight of the beam for a moment, coming back down, her feet alighting firmly.

You're here as a competitor. There's no other way—there never will be.

She went into a squat turn—

Hades could be wrong.

—straightened, executed a front tuck—

I could be wrong.

—landed, performed a second series of dance elements. This brought her to her final tumbling pass.

If you don't do it now, you'll never know.

She lined up, narrowing her eyesight along the length of the beam, disregarding everything else.

What's it going to be?

She launched herself across the beam again, performed her pass, followed by the dismount, a beautiful full-twisting double back—she landed it perfectly. Knees together, back straight, arms outstretched. Perfect poise and execution. The NAU spectators' cheers were deafening as she presented, waved, and hustled off the podium to where Hades, now open-mouthed, was standing. She thrust herself into his arms, smiling, crying, whispering into his ear as the cameras loomed close: "I couldn't help myself—I had to do it, Coach Hades."

Hades reacted slowly, as if drugged (those watching the live footage no doubt thought he was pleasantly stunned that one of his star athletes had come through in the end). "What was that, Monica?"

"Stage words," she reminded him. Then, loud enough for the cameras to hear, she started recounting the details of her routine—superficial fluff for the media hounds to lap up as the rest of the team, thrilled by her breach of protocol, surrounded her—

—she didn't have long to savor her victory. One moment the cameras were rushing at her, a dozen reporters' questions ringing in her ears, the next she was jolted out of her skin as a deafening explosion rang out across the arena.

Zeus was toppling over.

The team fell to the floor, debris raining down, dust filling the air. Alarms sounded; people were yelling, screaming. Hades said something, but Monica couldn't make out any of his words. Momentarily she was on her feet again, and Stacie grabbed her by the arm, hauled her away. She was trying to gather the other members of the team as well, but there seemed to be a miscommunication between herself and Tompkins' men, many of whom were dazed or injured. Beside the podium, which now had a large chunk of scorched stonework resting at its center, Hades was helping to cradle an injured cameraman. Smoke filled the air.

"Get the girls out of here!" he yelled. "Someone call a medic!"

Stacie nodded. Kim had Lena and Britney with him. Cross...Monica wasn't sure, but she thought she recognized him as one of three individuals laying bloodied beneath a collapsed camera boom.

"Everyone together," rasped Stacie, gathering Monica, Jackie, Autumn, and Kristen.

"What about our bags?" wheezed Jackie.

"Leave them. We need to get out of here *now*."

Kim started toward the nearest exit. Stacie's group followed close behind. Unfortunately, by the time they'd navigated their way around the podium and judges' tables, the doors were clogged with the frenzied bodies of those also trying to get out. Athletes, judges, news folk, and spectators were pushing and shoving, coughing and covering their mouths with their shirtsleeves. Try as she might, Monica couldn't help but get separated from the others, and was actually lifted up off her feet. Worse, she was being squeezed to death, her breath coming in gasps, her legs kicking, flexing, toes stretching and trying to feel for the floor below—

—a hand grabbed her own, clenched it tightly, pulling.

"Monica!"

She craned her neck. John was beside her. Elbowing his way forward, he slid his other arm around her midsection, and with superhuman strength hoisted her up and partially out of the melee so that she was able to climb on peoples' arms and shoulders to the edge of the corridor. There was a door—John kicked it open and thrust her inside, where it was dark, quiet, the terrible rumble of people outside muffled by a miniature forest of mops, brooms, and hoses.

He slammed the door, fumbled for the light switch. "You'll get trampled to death out there."

"How did you find me?" Monica asked, swallowing hard, suddenly shaking all over. *God, please let my family be okay—*

"I was sitting front row," John said, wiping sweat from his brow. "Of course, I had my eye on you for the whole rotation. I escaped the stands as soon as I saw you being herded toward the exit."

Monica wrapped her arms around him, held him tight. "Thank God you're

here."

"We'll wait a few minutes—there's more air in here than there is out there." He gestured at the cooling vent above.

"Okay." Monica cleared her throat, loosened her grip somewhat and looked down at herself. How ridiculous she must have looked in her torn leotard, with her hair disheveled, a tangled mess. "Some hero I am."

"You were magnificent."

No, no! she thought, several heavy regrets converging on her conscience. *I should have just done my part and gone home. I missed the point entirely! America was trying to wean itself from the Patriot System. We were* supposed *to lose our slot aboard Olympus. My win will keep us locked in for another four years!* Of course, there were other scores, others sports to take into account, but that didn't matter because at the moment she was certain her beam routine had been the crux of a deep-seeded agreement that had ended up in disaster. She'd screwed up big time. "Oh, what have I done, John?"

"You haven't done anything—"

"I was supposed to go down on the balance beam. Those were my orders and I disobeyed—and now everything's fallen apart."

"Shh," John whispered, holding her close and brushing her hair with his hand. "It's guerrilla politics. They would have done it anyway. It had nothing to do with you. This is above our heads."

"But everyone knows...everyone *knows* what Heroes' Day is. I *knew*, and still I had to compete for myself instead of for the team...instead of for my country. Oh, I was so foolish!"

"It's okay, Monica. It's going to be okay. Just be still. It's going to be okay..."

John went on like that for several minutes, long after Monica had fallen into a sullen trance. She felt the strength in his arms, felt the firmness of his chest straining as he braced himself against the door—she could also feel his pulse, could feel how frantic it was keeping his whole body alert and shaking and flooded with adrenaline.

Any moment, she thought, starting to cry. *Any moment now some bloodthirsty terrorist will come barreling through the door and they'll find us and it'll be over.*

The scary thing was, she wanted it to be over, whether by way of a daring rescue or by a bullet to the head—

—she wanted it to be over.

Epilogue

The afternoon was calm and quiet, the pre-autumn breeze lazily tousling Monica's hair as she pulled into the parking lot, turned the car off, and sat for a moment savoring the nostalgia. It was comforting to no end that the place was still standing ten years on. For much of that time she'd kept away, but now...well, it felt right to finally be taking the plunge.

She left the car, crossed the small parking lot, with its cracked asphalt and faded parking grid, and entered the gym. There was a group of eight girls being tended to by Donna and her assistant. Most of the girls were busy, though a few paid her brief glances, offered polite smiles—they were all too young, really, to know who she was despite the fact that her face was plastered on several hall of fame walls around the club. She could remember (fondly, now) being that young, being so absorbed in her own little world that everything on the news was just fantasy.

How precious was that while!

Gary was in his office, arguing with someone on the phone. When he saw Monica standing in the doorway, his face immediately brightened, and he excused himself before ending the call.

"Small-town politics again?" Monica asked, entering more fully, closing the door behind her.

Gary chuckled, stepping out from behind his desk and embracing her briefly, then holding her at arm's length. "Nothing that can't wait. My, you're looking absolutely lovely these days!"

"I try."

He gestured at one of the infamous plastic foldout chairs, reclaimed his post behind his desk, where he leaned back and sighed. "How is Patrick?"

Taking a seat (*I still fit!* she thought, mildly amused that even into her late twenties she'd never made it past the five-foot mark), Monica said, "The model husband."

"And the kids?"

"Little handfuls. Getting into *everything* now that they've mastered walking upright."

"Some things never change, eh?"

"True."

Gary shook his head, his attention momentarily diverted by the newscast playing on his TV. "Rough times. They say the fed rate is going up again. Jobless claims, too."

"And yet we're still here. How long has the middle-class been an endangered

species?"

"Since before I was born."

"Good lord," said Monica, smiling playfully. "That must have been during the, um...what came before the analog days?"

"The Ice Age, my darling." Gary paused a moment, studying his screen. "Look at this." He swiveled it around so that Monica could see as well. There was a documentary on, *The Rise and Fall of Patriot America*. What caught her eye was a snippet of footage taken from the day John and herself had been rescued from the storage closet aboard Olympus. There, in front of two-dozen reporters (and more than a billion Americans watching from the comfort of their homes), Darren Hades was hefting little Monica Sardinia in front of the microphones. There, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face, she was reciting her impromptu speech: "I think it's really unfortunate what's happened, but I'm glad that it's over, and I just want to go home. What? Will I compete again? I'm sure...but right now I'm just trying to get a grip on everything...no, I don't regret it. I don't know what I'd do without gymnastics. I'd go crazy—it's prepared me for anything I will ever face in life."

"Wow," murmured Gary. He lowered the volume. "That must take you back."

Monica nodded, remembering. Numerous athletes and more than a hundred spectators had lost their lives that day. The Olympic Arena had suffered serious structural damage. At least a dozen terrorist organizations had claimed responsibility for the bombing (though there was never any proof that they'd planned to coincide it with the completion of her balance beam routine).

"That wasn't even how it happened," she said.

Gary waited, listened.

"When they first found us in the closet, it was John who carried me—but the news crew thought it would be more patriotic if Darren 'found' me. So they brought him over. They scribbled some words for us to say, and we said them. Can you believe that?"

"You know how I feel about the media in general."

"I think I do."

"Do you still keep in touch with your teammates, with...John was his name?"

Monica blushed. "God, he was so in love with me—and I was in love with him."

"Ah. First love."

"Yeah, but not true love. We met during training—it was all so new to me. Competitive energy, hormones, the works. We never really talked after what happened. We were so young. I think in distancing ourselves from the tragedy we distanced ourselves from each other. He was there for me when I needed him, that's all. As for the girls, most of them left the sport. Jackie stayed, but dropped down to the junior level. She's an actress now, I think."

Out in the training area, the Keenes' girls cheered loudly.

"Sounds like someone mastered a new trick," said Gary.

"You *know* you're going to miss that."

"All the way to my little patch of sun and surf in Cancun, thank you very much."

Monica looked out the window, imagining Gary in an oversized T-shirt and a Speedo. She still couldn't believe he was retiring. "I was thinking about Darren on the way over."

"Hmf."

"He once told me that a single person can't change the world overnight."

"Pessimistic fellow—if it weren't for you, we'd still be stuck with the Patriot System today."

"That's not it," said Monica. "I was only a small part of something that had been building for decades. It merely reached a crisis on that first Heroes' Day event—though for the longest time I was convinced it was my fault." Indeed, it had been hard for the first few years. The media liked its icons, and as Hades had once become the poster boy for the launch of the Patriot System, so had she become the poster girl for its demise. "I used to think you were crazy for limiting yourself to this dinky old gym, but Darren's statement made me realize I didn't need to change the world, I just need to be a part of it. I feel like I can finally do that now."

Gary smiled. "It's good to know you've come to your senses—but look here, keep your first day on the job light and easy." He rose from his chair. "No soggy memories?"

"No soggy memories."

"Excellent. Let's go meet the girls, then."

Monica followed him into the training room.

About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.